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Analysis of the Philosophy of Lucius Annaeus Seneca

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ANALYSIS OF THE PHILOSOPHY
OF
LUCIUS ANNAEUS SENECA

BY
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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts
at
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APPRECIATION

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	PAGE 1
CHAPTER I Seneca: Education and Political Back- ground	4
II The Schools of Philosophy at Rome	9
III Sources of Senecan Philosophy	19
IV Seneca's Conception of God	27
V Seneca's Ideas of the Human Soul	40
VI Seneca Analyzes Conscience	44
VII Virtue and the Summum Bonum of Senecan Philosophy	48
VIII Seneca Living Life in View of Death	59
IX Seneca's Thoughts on Death	65
X Seneca Speaks on Life After Death	93
XI Senecan Views on Immortality	108
XII Summary and Conclusion	112
BIBLIOGRAPHY	115

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is, as indicated by the title, to investigate the system of philosophy and morality delineated by Lucius Annaeus Seneca the Younger. The volumes of Senecan composition are numerous and varied in theme, but throughout there pervades a philosophical influence entirely new to Rome. Other teachers adhering to their particular schools of thought, had brought forth many of the tenets held by Seneca. It is here that the individuality of the man exhibits itself in that his was a system composed of the elements of many schools. This investigation purposes to analyze Senecan teaching both in its origin and in its content, in its theory and in practice.

Truth, objective truth, is the same for the pagan as it is for the Christian. Blinded though he might have been by the grossness of error, let us give the pagan credit for his efforts to arrive at the eternal verities. We who possess the inestimable light of grace, the heritage of well defined and accurately stated philosophical teaching, the books of Divine Revelation and the supernatural guidance of an infallible authority, too often take it for granted that the same position obtained for pagan thinkers of the past. The actual case is far otherwise. "Flying blind," to use a current aeronautical term, they had no guide other than the light of reason, often grossly perverted either by personal misconduct on the one hand or on the other by the materialistic environment in which they lived. But they too,

many of them, aspired to a more rational existence, and in saner moments sought to discover and formulate standards of life which would ultimately lead to a reasonable goal. Seneca may be credited with such aspirations, laboring the while in the darkness of paganism.

In the endeavor to formulate from his writings a set group of principles which may be styled the "Senecan System of Morality," we must define his position on the existence and nature of God, the human soul, the purpose of life, man's attitude towards death, life hereafter and immortality. These topics contain the mass of Senecan philosophy. They will be studied in the order indicated. A code of morality summarized from the multifarious works of a man whose very ideas were themselves a compilation of the thoughts of other masters, will of its very nature admit of many discrepancies. Thus, from the tangled mass of inconsistencies, not to say pure guess-work and actual contradictions appearing in the various works of Seneca, it will be our endeavor to evolve some tangible system of thought which might be said to be Senecan Morality, Senecan Philosophy.

Statements of Seneca to which reference is made will be taken from the Dialogi, the Epistulae ad Lucilium and the Naturales Quaestiones.¹ Only brief mention will be made of the

1. Lucius Annaeus Seneca, Opera Omnia, (Teubner Edition, 1898).

Tragoediae, and this for several reasons. Of these it is sufficient to mention the most important. While the plays abound in moral and philosophical observations, these latter are based on mythological references, and in the words of Seneca himself² they should bear no weight in so important a discussion.

2. Ep. xxiv, 18.

Ep. lxxxii, 16.

Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xix, 4.

CHAPTER I

SENECA: EDUCATION AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND

Lucius Annaeus Seneca was born in Corduba (the present Cordova), Spain about the year 4 B.C., but was brought to Rome in early life. His first teachers of note were Sotion, the Pythagorean of Alexandria, and Fabianus Papirius. Of the latter he wrote in later life, "Fabianus, non ex his cathedrariis philosophis, sed ex veris et antiquis",³ indicating his reverence for this master. By the time he was twenty-five, Seneca was a thorough-going follower of Pythagoras. For it was in 19 A.D. that his father made the lad give up his newly acquired habit of abstinence from flesh meat.⁴ This latter was a practice advocated by the Pythagoreans. As he himself says, Seneca thought nobly of this school for a time. He writes, "non pudebit fateri quem mihi amorem Pythagoras iniecerit".⁵

From the Pythagoreans, Sotion and Fabianus Papirius, the young student passed to the lecture room of Attalus the Stoic, which latter teacher had a more decided influence on his char-

3. De Brevitate Vitae, x, 1.

4. Ep. cviii, 22.

Ibid., cviii, 17.

Ep. lxi, 15.

Quaestiones Naturales, viii, 32, 2.

5. Ep. cviii, 17.

acter.⁶ The elder Seneca described this new pedagogue as the most eloquent and by far the most acute philosopher of his time, "magnae vir eloquentiae ex philosophis, quos nostra aetas vidit, longe et subtilissimus et facundissimus".⁷ Long years later as an old man, Seneca spoke with reverence and affection of his master in the school of Stoicism.⁸

Quintilian tells us that the Roman character was for taking up the thoughts developed by the Greeks, and putting them into practice. And, as a true Roman, he adds that this is the more important phase of living, "Quantum enim Graeci praeceptis valent, tantum Romani (quod est maius) exemplis".⁹ Seneca, earnest in his quest for the "summum bonum", practiced literally the dicta of his new-found school. He undertook such gross imprudences as cold baths in winter, and by reason of his already weakened condition contracted tuberculosis. The thought of his old father was the only restraining force which deterred him from suicide.

Thoroughly versed in the systems of Pythagoras and the

6. Francis Holland, Seneca, (London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1920). p. 15.

7. Suasoriae, ii.

8. Ep. lxvii, 15.

Ep. ix, 7.

Ep. lxiii, 5.

Ep. lxxxi, 22.

Ep. cviii, 13.

Ep. cx, 14.

9. Institutiones Oratoriae, xii, 2.

Stoics, Seneca also read widely of the works of Epicurus.

Though he never adopted the practices taught by the Cynics, he often speaks favorably of the arch-cynic Diogenes,¹⁰ and again and again refers to the Cynic Demetrius as a man worthy of the highest esteem.¹¹

The life of Seneca was one of singularly dramatic contrasts and vicissitudes.¹² He began his public life in the year 32 A.D. under Claudius. Banished in 41 A.D. to the island of Corsica, Seneca used his time of exile writing his philosophical treatises. He was restored to favor ten years later, and was appointed tutor for the young Nero, a task he fulfilled until the year 62 A.D. This latter date marked the beginning of Seneca's retirement. For three years he enjoyed the privacy of home life, during which time he wrote many of his beautiful moral epistles to his friend Lucilius. In the year 65 A.D., it was recommended to him by Nero that he liquidate himself.¹³ In brief this is the general summary of Seneca's life.

As a young lawyer at the court of Caligula, as a senator during the reign of Claudius, and virtually as administrator for

10. Ep. xxix, 1.
Ep. xlvii, 12.
Ep. xc, 14.

11. Ep. xx, 9.
Ep. lxii, 3.
Ep. lxvii, 14.
Ep. xci, 19.

12. J.W. Mackail, Latin Literature, (Chicago, Ill., : Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923). p. 172.

13. Tacitus, Annales, xv.
 Suetonius, Vitae.

Nero, Seneca passed the greater part of his life under the mad despotism of the Roman court. Lucas describes the situation:

In a perfectly desperate position, with only one path before him, he could tread it finely; but it was a desperate position indeed, when that agile brain could not find a way round and justify itself to the same.¹⁴

His good sense and judgment, together with an even tempered disposition enabled Seneca to last at the court longer, perhaps, than others of the imperial advisors. He knew his Rome much better than many native-born Romans knew her.¹⁵ During his tenure of office he was able to amass a fortune which in our coin would exceed fifteen million dollars, and held estates in various parts of the empire.¹⁶

Such was the background in which Seneca tried to pursue the higher things of the mind. All his writings and philosophical teachings must be viewed in the light of the splendor--and constant peril of the court. The morality he would set forth was to be no abstract set of formulae intended for drawing-room perusal, or even as applicable to life in a normal situation. It was written by a man of action for men

...living under a reign of terror, whose lives were

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- 14. F.L. Lucas, Seneca and the Elizabethan Tragedy, (Cambridge, Mass.: The University Press, 1922). p. 45.
 - 15. R.M. Gummere, Seneca the Philosopher and His Modern Message, (Boston: Marshall Jones Company, 1922). p. 50.
 - 16. H.N. Fowler, A History of Roman Literature, (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1932). p. 178

in daily peril; and its object was to free them from anxiety and brace their minds to meet their fate with indifference and dignity.¹⁷

17. Holland, op. cit., p. 186.

CHAPTER II

THE SCHOOLS OF PHILOSOPHY AT ROME

Seneca's thoughts on the subject of life, death and the hereafter can be studied only after a thorough understanding of his entire philosophy of life, against the background of the divers schools of thought of his day. Terming philosophy the "vitae lex",¹⁸ he qualifies himself to formulate his own canons of belief in as much as the light of philosophy shines for all, "philosophia...omnibus lucet".¹⁹ Beginning his study, Seneca makes bold to say that he will cover the entire field of moral philosophy and solve all the problems arising therefrom, "scis enim me moralem philosophiam velle complecti et omnes ad eam pertinentis quaestiones explicare".²⁰ And as an end to be attained, we are warned that "auditionem...philosophorum...ad propositum beatæ vitæ trahendam".²¹

In the ages before the ideals of Christianity became the well nigh universal guide of men's lives, there arose periodically a creed especially adapted to the men of a given age.²² In the first century A.D., it called itself Stoicism. Undoubt-

18. Ep. xciv, 39.

19. Ep. xliv, 3.

20. Ep. cvi, 2.

21. Ep. cviii, 35.

22. F.L. Lucas, Seneca and the Elizabethian Tragedy, Cambridge: The University Press, 1922). p. 47.

edly the noblest and purest of the ancient sects,²³ Stoicism passed beyond the limit of the schools and became at once a religious creed and a code of morals for every-day use in the life of Rome.²⁴ The ancient school of Stoicism had been founded by the Greek, Zeno,²⁵ and received its name from the fact that Zeno had lectured on the Painted Porch or Stoa Poikile of Athens.

The Stoic doctrines lay fallow on Latin soil during several centuries before Christ.²⁶ It had a good deal of potential energy, but as such remained purely potential, until the birth of Quintus Sextius Niger about 70 B.C. Two of his scholars were Sotion and Papirius Fabianus. As has been noted,²⁷ these latter were followers of Pythagoras but aided greatly the efforts of Niger in formulating what they liked to consider a definitely Roman school. They were to inculcate their doctrines in the mind of the young Seneca. Niger seems to have combined his Stoic tendencies,²⁸ with a number of Pythagorean elements, and into it all "infused a fresh vigor of moral zeal".²⁹

23. F.W. Ferrar, Seekers after God, (London:---, 1874). intro., p. 5.

Ibid., p. 33.

24. J.W. Mackail, Latin Literature, (Chicago, Ill.: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923). p. 171.

25. Ad Helviam de Consolatione, xii, 4.
Ep. lxxxiii, 9.

26. Holland, op. cit., p. 170.

27. Cf. ante, p. 4.

28. Ep. lxiv.

29. J.E. Sandys, A Companion to Latin Studies, (Cambridge: The University Press, 1921). p. 710.

The Romans wanted a system of rules which would govern conduct, the "quod est maius" of Quintilian.³⁰ They were often kept back in the theological development of their ideas by a pragmatism that throttled the desire for knowledge, that subordinated the search for the unknown to respect for what exists.³¹ Whereas science concerns itself with the quest after truth regardless of the consequences of its being brought to light, the Roman feared such consequences. And in conditions such as those in which Seneca lived, well he might fear them. In subsequent pages of this discussion it will be noted what effect such materialistic influences had on the thinking process of Seneca.³² He could go just so far in formulating his independent system of morals, then when confronted by the impregnable barrier of the very practical consideration of life or death, he altered his plan of action to suit the circumstances.

The Stoic school would have it that the soul is corporeal and that it grows to perfection of reason with the growth of the body. And since it is corporeal with the body, the soul ceases to exist at death.³³ With this as a starting point, all good

30. Institutiones Oratoriae, xii, 2.

31. A. Grenier, The Roman Spirit, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1926). p. 397.

32. Cf. post p. 71.

33. C.T. Cruttwell, A History of Roman Literature, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1886). p. 388.

stoics taught the end of life, the "summum bonum" of Seneca, was the agreement of man in thought and action with "natura:" "Interim, quod inter omnis Stoicos convenit rerum naturae adsentior...sapientia est."³⁴ This latter term was variously defined as the "nature of man", the nature of things in general", and the "nature of the universe". This harmony with nature is virtue (virtus), or wisdom (sapientia). Similarly, all things foolish (stulte) were vice, or a lack of harmony with nature. Things in between or events in general, as well as "fortuna", were classed as the "indifferentia".³⁵ This school demanded not a mere curbing of the passions in man, but their entire suppression and eradication.

Utrum satius sit modicos habere adfectus an nullos, saepe quaesitum est. Nostri illos expellunt, Peripatetici temperant. Ego non video, quomodo salubris esse aut utilis possit ulla mediocritas morbi.³⁶

The Stoic had a God reduced to unity from the many deities of early paganism. He was hardly a personality; in any case he had little relation with the universe. Life and death were considered as "indifferentia",³⁷ and were submitted to the choice of the wise man. If it is appropriate for him to remain in life,

34. De Vita Beata, iii, 3.

35. Ep. lxxxii, 10, 14.

Cf. Cicero, De Finibus, iii, 50 ff.

36. Ep. cxvi, 1.

37. Ep. lxxxii, 10.

he does so; if the balance inclines to the other side as a convenient way of obviating difficulties, the door is open. Nothing compels him to stay.³⁸ This principle sanctions the Cato eulogized so often by Seneca;³⁹ it is likewise applicable to Seneca himself and a host of Stoics who during the reign of Nero followed his example. The continuous harping on this idea on the one hand, and on the other constant dread, made suicide extraordinarily prevalent--suicide out of pure ennui, discontent, or fear of the consequences of living.⁴⁰

Viciously good and morbidly healthy,⁴¹ the Stoic sage put himself in the light of a rigid corpse floating on the tide of events. He trained his will to will nothing.⁴² He thus lived in a sort of subnormal or subconscious ease by reason of his complete indifference to the fears--likewise the pleasures--surrounding him. Stoicism, followed to its logical conclusions, may in many of its tenets be termed a philosophy of cowardice. Rather than fight the passions, the Stoics would be rid of them. Either as the savage they feared death with an intensity of terror; or glutted with the crimes or sorrows of life, they found

38. Sandys, op. cit., p. 709.

39. Ep. civ, 29.

Ep. lxxii, 12.

Ep. lxxxii, 13.

De Tranquillitate Animi, xvi, 1.

De Providentia, i, ii, 11-12.

40. Ferrar, op. cit., p. 49.

41. De Constantia Sapientis, i, 1, 1.

42. Lucas, op. cit., p. 47.

living insupportable and slunk to death as a refuge with a cowardice which vaunted itself as courage.⁴³ In so much as it advocated the elimination of inordinate passions, it shone brightly amid the profligacy of ancient Rome.

In its practical aspects, Stoicism may be said to stand midway between the extremes of Epicureanism and Cynicism. The latter cult had but few adherents, by reason of its extreme pessimism. It may be termed the superlative--the reductio ad absurdum--of the Stoics.⁴⁴ The Cynics derived their name from the Greek word meaning "dog", from what appeared to some of the ancients to be the doglike brutality of their customs. Juvenal ironically remarks that the Stoics were the same as the Cynics, differing only "by a tunic" which the latter had discarded.⁴⁵ Referring to the concrete aspect of any Roman system of thought the Cynic principles are mentioned in Seneca only in extreme measures, when the milder form of Stoic passivism would not stand up under the force of circumstances.⁴⁶

Among Roman moralists the sect of Epicurus attracted few disciples. With its highest good the satisfaction of man's sensual or physical appetites the teachings of the Epicureans did

43. Ferrar, op. cit., p. 51.

44. "Seneca", in Warner's Library of the World's Best Literature, p. 13132.

45. Juvenal, Sat. xiii, 122.

46. Ep. lxii, 3.

De Providentia, v, 7.

not appeal to those whose efforts were bent either on correcting living, or on making life livable under prevailing conditions. The Stoics seeing their efforts thwarted, if not in fact, at least in the theory underlying the Epicurean system, carried the contest beyond the mere difference-of-opinion stage, as is clearly indicated in several passages in Seneca. He thus describes the Epicureans: "modo Epicureum, laudantem statum quietae civitatis et inter convivia cantusque vitam exigentis."⁴⁷

Along with their moral differences the Stoics took issue with the Epicureans, as they did in turn with the other schools for their opinions on the hereafter, on the nature of God, the human soul and other tenets of their sect.

The school of Epicurus held that the soul was as much corporeal as was the body of an animal, that it was composed of very fine particles united in one mass.⁴⁸ While the soul is said to be distributed over all the body, its chief seat is in the breast. Virtue is pursued because it is the means of being tranquil, of getting more rest, "corpus sine dolore...animus sine perturbatione."⁴⁹ Since life was believed to terminate with death, the soul being mortal, the summum bonum of this

47. Ep. lxxxviii, 5.

Warner's Library, etc. op. cit., p. 13132.
Sandys, op. cit., p. 707.

48. Lucretius, De Rerum Natura, III.

49. Ep. lxvi, 45.

school was complete physical well-being. There was a multiplicity of gods living in the intermundia or space between the world of matter and world of nothingness, but they had absolutely no control or any relation whatsoever with the affairs of men. They endeavored to prove this latter point by noting the inequality in the apportionment of the goods and evils of life.⁵⁰

It often happened that the doctrines of Epicurus were held to the charge of corrupting morals, and leading men into lives of degeneration.⁵¹ So claimed, for the most part, the whole sect of the Stoics.⁵² But as Seneca well notes in several places, "many have recourse to him through a bad motive thinking that they will have in him a screen for their own vices."⁵³

After the time of Cicero and more especially in the reign of Augustus, the teachings of Pythagoras were revived, and blended all the prevalent systems of Plato, Zeno and Epicurus with a sort of mystic tinge. Pythagoras is said to have coined the word "philosophy" when replying to a question as to what he considered himself in the domain of rationality. He answered "a philosopher" (a seeker after wisdom), for he considered it the

50. Sandys, op. cit., p. 698.

51. Ep. xxxiii, 2.

52. De Vita Beata, xiii, 2.

53. Ep. xxi, 10.

De Vita Beata, xiii, 2.

Ibid., xii, 4.

height of arrogance for one to think himself a sage, that is, one who has acquired knowledge.⁵⁴ Adherents of Pythagoreanism believed in the soul, a spiritual substance in man. All actions of this life should be performed in view of an infinite future.

More definitely than did the other schools, Pythagoreanism propagated the belief in a future life, and went even to the extent of giving a form to this belief. Once the soul leaves the body it goes to Hades, an underground stopping place, where it is purified, awaiting reincarnation. It returns to earth again for new trials, and will inhabit animate, vegetable, animal or human life, higher or lower forms of existence, depending on how well it has merited. "Nulla anima interit, ne cessat quidem nisi tempore exiguo, dum in aliud corpus transfunditur."⁵⁵ In his De Beneficiis, Seneca tells us an interesting and rather amusing story of an exact Pythagorean who would pay back the debt he owed to a friend now dead. At first the philosopher planned to keep the money owed his friend, the latter having died. The neighbors, however, reminded him of his own preaching that we continue to exist after death and that in view of this fact he still owed the debt. Suddenly aware of his inconsistency, or perhaps of this practical application of his creed, the philosopher went to

54. St. Augustine, De Civitate Dei, lib. viii, cap. ii.

55. Ep. cviii, 19.

the shop of his deceased friend, flung the money through the open door, and chided himself for having had a temptation to infidelity.⁵⁶ The doctrine, therefore, abounds in ascetic precepts tending to insure purity of soul.⁵⁷ Sotion, the Pythagorean, forbade Seneca to eat flesh meat, lest he commit parricide by injuring the soul of an ancestor with either teeth or fork.⁵⁸ They practiced frugality, temperance and vegetarianism, and had many followers in Rome.⁵⁹ As did the Stoics, these men believed in the utter destruction of the passions. "Solebat dicere Fabianus (Pythagorianus)...contundi debere, non vellicari."⁶⁰

56. De Beneficiis, vii, 21.

57. Grenier, op. cit., p. 372.

58. Ep. cviii, 19.

59. Ibid., 17.

60. De Brevitate Vitae, x, 1.

CHAPTER III

SOURCES OF SENECA'S PHILOSOPHY

Such were the systems of thought to which Seneca was exposed, from which he could and did draw freely in evolving a new and, if not a more practical, at least a more pleasant standard of action and living. While he cautions us "nunc veritatem quaerimus,"⁶¹ it is doubtful if Seneca had any objective ideal of truth in mind. His many inconsistencies and contradictions illustrate his attitude of making his principles subject to the exigencies of the time. The result of his entire investigations leaves the riddle of life still unsolved for Seneca, "quod est pessimum numquam sciens cuius esses status."⁶² Seneca's teaching was a sort of amalgamation of the moral principles of Zeno, Epicurus and Pythagoras, "Nostram accipe. Nostram autem cum dico, non alligo me ad unum aliquem ex Stoicis proceribus; est et mihi censendi ius."⁶³ In this respect Seneca was like many of the Roman Stoics, eclectic or encyclopaedic in his views.⁶⁴ Though these various teachers differed in so much as the first mentioned

61. De Otio, iii, 1.

62. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xvii, 1.

63. De Vita Beata, iii, 2.

Albert Grenier, The Roman Spirit, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926). p. 397.

F.J. Miller, Seneca's Tragedies, (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1917). intro. p. 8.

64. J.E. Sandys, A Companion to Latin Studies, (Cambridge: The University Press, 1921). p. 710.

proceeded from idealism, the second from materialism, and the third from a sort of spiritualism, it mattered little since their precepts came to the same thing.⁶⁵ Seneca showed an indifference to exact scientific theory and rather a willingness to take good moral teaching as his own, regardless of the quarter from which it came.⁶⁶ As Teuffel puts it,

He started from the Stoic system but in him its barren austerity was toned down, the harshness softened, its crotchets laid aside; nor did he disdain additions from the other systems.⁶⁷

Seneca had a genial and tolerant nature which made it most agreeable for him to become a sort of pluralist. He was little able to tolerate general admonitions which were irrevocable, but rather made up his world from his own personal investigations and ideas.⁶⁸ He would address his followers "non Stoica lingua, sed hac submissiore."⁶⁹ He considered himself a thorough-going Stoic,⁷⁰ an ingenious and virtuous philosopher.⁷¹ Nevertheless he makes it plain that he does not want to be bound by this

65. De Vita Beata, xiii, 1.
Ep. lxvi, 47.

66. John W. Basore, "Seneca's Moral Essays", in Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: The University Press, 1935). vol. i, intro.

67. Miller, op. cit., intro.

68. R.M. Gummere, Seneca the Philosopher and His Modern Message, (Boston: Marshall Jones Co., 1922) p. 50.

69. Ep. xiii, 4.

70. De Tranquillitate Animi, i, 10.

71. F.W. Ferrar, Seekers after God, (London:---, 1874).
p. 161.
Ep. cvi, 2.

school exclusively: "Nullius nomen fero."⁷² In general, he would not be in complete obeisance to any of his predecessors; he could feel this way about it, for heresy is not a word in the vocabulary of philosophy.⁷³

The bitter feud which waged through the ages between the Stoics and Epicureans might serve to illustrate the tenacity with which these schools maintained their respective points of view. And therefore, we can but admire the open-minded view taken by Seneca when he repeatedly quotes Epicurus as the authority for a point he is making.⁷⁴ He explains this liberal view of the matter, saying that he intends to praise the dicta of all schools:

Ut scias quam benigni simus, propositum est
aliena laudare; Epicuri est aut Metrodori aut ali-
cuius ex illa officina. Et quid interest quid
dixerit? Omnibus dixit.⁷⁵

Seneca maintains that those who "in verba iurant nec quid dicatur aestiment," should realize that whatever has been said well should be regarded as "communis".⁷⁶ And in another letter he

72. Ep. xlv, 4.

73. F.L. Lucas, Seneca and Elizabethan Tragedy, (Cambridge: The University Press, 1922). p. 47.

74. Ep. xvii, 11 (on wealth).

Ep. xviii, 14 (on anger).

Ep. xx, 9, (on Poverty).

Ep. xxv, 5, (on sincerity).

Ep. xxii, 5, (on danger).

75. Ep. xiv, 17.

76. Ep. xii, 11.

Ep. xiii, 8.

tells us that he is wont to cross into the enemy's camp, not as a deserter but as a scout, "soleo enim et in aliena castra transire, non tamquam transfuga, sed tamquam explorator."⁷⁷ His

tolerant attitude leads him to condemn any type of complete mental slavery to the opinions of others. He definitely makes this point, when he writes to Lucilius: "Primum exponam, quid Stoicis videatur: deinde tunc dicere sententiam audebo...Ego non idem sentio."⁷⁸ Earlier, Seneca had written that even if the Stoics

did revere their masters in the past, "non sumus sub rege; sibi quisque se vindicat."⁷⁹ For, he notes, if a man always follows the opinions of one person, his place is not in the senate house but out among the anarchists, "quoniam si quis semper unius sequitur, non in curia sed in factione est."⁸⁰

As evidenced in his works, Seneca was possessed of a mind quick and brilliant, but not sure or thorough in its conclusions. While his system of eclecticism may appear reasonable, it was certainly not consistently workable either in theory or in practice. True, it was practicable in the sense of its being materialistic and utilitarian in outlook; but its want of logic in arrangement, its failure to be universally applicable, its lack of psychological appeal, make Seneca's philosophy less easy to

77. Ep. ii, 5.

78. Ep. cxvii, 1.

79. Ep. xxxiii, 4.

80. De Otio, iii, 1.

describe and actually use, than to understand.⁸¹ When he attempted to make his teaching applicable to his own every day life, he fell far short of even approximating his goal, and the inconsistency led him beyond all question into serious errors which deeply compromise his character.⁸²

After we have culled a uniform system of thought from Seneca's volumes of moral instructions, we find too often little conviction in the admonitions he sets forth. Claiming the privilege to legislate for himself, he grants the same benefit to others. While this procedure might indicate openness of mind and consideration for the differences of opinion, the implied assertion is that there actually is no certain standard of truth, that philosophic findings are entirely subjective, that is, depending entirely on just what a person wishes to find. In themselves Senecan instructions are perhaps unequalled among pagan works in natural goodness and virtue.⁸³

The Apostle of the Gentiles, the greatest of the Christian preachers, was haunted by the dread, as he put it, "lest having preached to others I myself become a castaway."⁸⁴ It was, per-

81. Francis Holland, Seneca, (London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1920). p. 164.

82. Ferrar, op. cit., p. 34.

83. J.W. Mackail, Latin Literature, (Chicago, Ill.: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923). p. 174.
Ferrar, op. cit., intro. p. 5.

84. I Cor. ix, 27.

haps, his humility and candid admission of frailty that saved him. Seneca, however, was less humble and, as a result, less consistent. For when his morals have been reduced to practice, his deeds continually belie his own preaching: a eulogist of freedom and the tutor of a tyrant; a decrrier of courtiers and yet never leaving the Palatine himself; one condemning flatterers yet author of the most debasing adulation of Messalina and Claudius' freedman; the enemy of riches and yet the possessor of over fifteen million dollars.⁸⁵

In Seneca we witness a man whose life was a tragic failure; this, because in the opposite of Dante's sense, he had not trained himself to make "great refusals".⁸⁶ The principle which led to his spiritual degradation was moral compromise. In a precarious position at the court of Nero, he endeavored to work on the principle of encouraging what was wrong in the vain hope of preventing something worse. He did succeed in staving off the terrible disaster. The delay, however, did but add to the intensity of the flame once it broke out. Fearful of the danger to his own life, as also of the other consequences in adhering to the path of righteousness, Seneca cleverly avoided distasteful issues. Clever he was indeed, but less clever he had proved a good deal

85. Lucas, op. cit., p. 45.

86. Ibid., p. 52

more edifying.^{87.}

As the most fluent, tolerant and persuasive of Roman instructors of morals, Seneca demonstrated in the trying crises of his life how hard it was to be brave, consistent or even free from crime under the mad despotism of a Caligula, a Claudius, or a Nero.⁸⁸

While he prided himself as being a gifted philosopher, he undertook the impossible task of living as an upright man⁸⁹ and pursuing the course of a statesman under the Caesars.⁹⁰

More than most people he desired to do the correct thing, but it was in his nature to hate more than most other people the unpleasant things, especially unpleasantness with other people.⁹¹

By not taking the lofty line of duty that Zeno would have taken, Seneca permitted the element of expediency to be the standard of his conduct, rather than to hold to obligation regardless of the outcome. No man ever gained anything but contempt and ruin by continually wavering between two opinions. Mr. Froude well delineated the character of Seneca, when he refers us to Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress:

Of all unsuccessful men, in every shape,
whether divine or human or devilish, there is none
equal to Bunyan's Mr. Facing-both-ways--the fellow
with one eye on heaven and one on earth--who sin-

87. Ibid., p. 45. Lucas, op. cit.,

88. "Seneca," in Warner's Library of the World's Best Literature, p. 13119.

89. Ep. cvi, 2.

90. De Otio, 1, 4.

91. Lucas, op. cit., p. 45.

cerely preaches one thing and sincerely does another, and from the intensity of his unreality is unable either to see or feel the contradiction. He is substantially trying to cheat both God and the devil, and is in reality only cheating himself and his neighbors. This of all characters upon the earth appears to us to be the one of which there is no hope at all.⁹²

Lucas writes that Seneca had "more intellect than his will-power could carry."⁹³ Seneca, with his moral acrobatics and supple complaisance, presents himself to us as an inconsistent teacher of right living. His life and doctrines are unintelligible save in the light of his political background.

92. Ferrar, op. cit., p. 163

93. Lucas, op. cit., p. 38.

CHAPTER IV

SENECA'S CONCEPTION OF GOD

When Seneca counselled Lucilius to investigate "quae materia sit dei,"⁹⁴ we may rightfully assume that he was in sincere quest of the fundamental source of life and being. In old age, he repeated the necessity of knowing God when he wrote that man will never make real progress until he has the right idea of God, "numquam satis profectum erit, nisi qualem debet deum mente conceperit..."⁹⁵ A statement such as either of the ones just quoted shows by far a greater depth of intellect, indicative perhaps of a real earnestness of purpose, than one in which he refers to the heavenly bodies as divinities, "paucorum motus comprehendimus, innumerabiles vero longiusque a conspectu seducti di eunt redeunt."⁹⁶ Here Seneca does but follow the ancient theory of the Stoics that the stars were so many gods. His actual convictions on the subject of divinity are rather difficult to analyze in so far as his works contain many conflicting references pertaining to the deity. First let us see how nearly Seneca came to truth in his theological vagaries. Afterwards his pagan explanations will be brought out. From a consideration of these two elements, we shall try to come to some con-

94. De Brevitate Vitae, xix, 1.

95. Ep. xcv, 48.

96. De Beneficiis, iv, 23, 4.

clusion as to just what conception he had of the Divinity.

Some of the eminent doctors of the early Church speak admiringly of the erudition and apparent Christian sentiments expressed by Seneca. He is quoted by Tertullian,⁹⁷ and by Lactantius. Even St. Augustine refers in many places to Seneca and this in an approving manner.⁹⁸ Lactantius is, perhaps, the most pointed when he says that Seneca speaks "as one of us":

He was the sharpest of all the Stoics. How great a veneration has he for the Almighty. And how many other things does this heathen speak of God, like one of us.⁹⁹

Now it is safe to state that these encomiums are lavished on Seneca solely by reason of his expressions of reverence for God. His entire code of morality evidences nothing more than good sense, practicality, expediency; it wants in its entirety any semblance of a supernatural motive. Seneca strikes the keynote of one of the natural proofs of the existence of God, when he says that even in our very souls there is that unlearned knowledge, or better perhaps, that unlearned realization of the existence of a Supreme Being. While this innate respect and reverence for Divinity exists in every man, still the words of Seneca

97. Tertullian, Apologetica, xii. (not extant)

98. St. Augustine, De Civitate Dei, Lib. v, Cap. vii, ix.

Ibid., Lib. ix, Cap. iv.

Ibid., Lib. vi, Cap. x.

Ibid., Lib. vi, Cap. xi.

99. Divinae Institutiones, Lib. i, Cap. 1.

Cf. Tertullian, De Anima.

give a definite expression to the fact that he is so impelled, "animum tuum quadam religionis suspicione percutiet."¹⁰⁰

As to acknowledging the true, living God, Seneca comes very near to orthodox theology in such remarks as "it is God who has set free the oxen throughout the earth;"¹⁰¹ "it is God, our Master, who draws forth...;"¹⁰² "God is worshipped by those who know Him."¹⁰³ The Deity is termed the "artifex divinus", designer of the universe.¹⁰⁴

Almost in Scriptural phrasing, Seneca affirms the omnipresence of God in the vast expanses of the universe: "Quocumque te flexeris, ibi illum videbis occurrentem tibi; nihil ab illo vacat, opus suum ipse implet."¹⁰⁵ The Christian doctrine of "God within us" might possibly be construed in the words "et socii sumus eius (dei) et membra."¹⁰⁶ The soul of man must be in a fitting condition "purus ac sanctus," or there is no room for God: "Quis sit summi boni locus quaeris? Animus. Hic nisi purus ac sanctus est deum non capit."¹⁰⁷ And another instance: "Prope est a te deus, tecum est intus est. Ita dico, Lucili: sacer intra nos spiritus sedet... Bonus vero vir sine deo nemo

100. Ep. xli, 3.

101. De Beneficiis, iv, 6, 5.

102. Ibid., iv, 6, 1.

103. Ep. xcv, 48.

104. Ep. cxiii, 16.

105. De Beneficiis, iv, 8, 2.

106. Ep. xcii, 30.

107. Ep. lxxxvii, 21.

est."¹⁰⁸ In the same letter he applies Virgil's words to complete his own thoughts, "In unoquoque virorum bonorum 'Quis deus incertum est, habitat deus.'"¹⁰⁹ Conversely, but as definitely in accord with Christian teaching, a soul without God is in a bad state: "Deus ad homines venit, immo quod propius, in homines venit; nulla sine deo mens bona est."¹¹⁰

Omniscience is an attribute of the Almighty by virtue of which He knows all things, even our inmost thoughts. Seneca seems to recognize this secret Witness and Judge of our conduct. "Quid enim prodest ab homine aliquid esse secretum? Nihil deo clusum est. Interest animis nostris et cogitationibus mediis intervenit."¹¹¹ And again when he warns: "Ita dico, Lucili: sacer intra nos spiritus sedet, malorum bonorumque nostrorum observator et custos. Hic prout a nobis tractatus est, ita nos ipse tractat."¹¹²

Divine Providence is recognized in terms worthy of one of the Great Fathers, "God also has given certain gifts to the whole human race, and from these no man is shut out," (Deus quo-

108. Ep. xli, 2.

Cf. Nat. Quaes. ii, x, 3.

Cf. Chas. P. Parker, "Sacer Intra Nos Spiritus," in Harvard Studies in Classical Philology, vol. xvii.

109. Ep. xli, 2.

Cf. Naturales Quaestiones, x, 3.

Cf. Aeneid, viii, 352.

110. Ep. lxxiii, 16.

111. Ep. lxxxiii, 2.

112. Ep. xli, 2.

que quaedam munera universo humano generi dedit, a quibus excluditur nemo).¹¹³ He tells Lucilius to consider always the blessings of our heavenly Father, "proinde, quisquis es...cogita quanta hobbis tribuerit parens noster."¹¹⁴ And also in this passage: "Quidquid nobis bono futurum erat, deus et parens noster in proximo posuit."¹¹⁵ Seneca even defends Divine Providence against the accusation of the Epicurean Lucilius, that the number of evils in the world proves the want of a just, guiding hand:

Quaesisti a me, Lucili, quid ista, si providentia mundus regeretur, multa bonis viris mala acciderent. Hoc commodius in contextu operis redderetur, cum praeesse universis providentiam probaremus et interesse nobis deum.¹¹⁶

To prove our fidelity in the way of righteousness, it often seems good to God to try us, and this, as Christian doctrine teaches, because He loves us. Seneca gives one Christian explanation for suffering in saying that God greatly loving the good (deus bonorum amantissimus), wishes them to become strong in virtue (illos optimos atque excellentissimos vult), sends the just many trials to exercise them (fortunam illis cum qua exerceantur adsignat).¹¹⁷ He seems to express this point in a parallel manner: "Patrium deus habet adversus bonos viros animum

113. De Beneficiis, iv, 28, 3.

114. Ibid., ii, 29, 4.

115. Ep. cx, 10.

116. De Providentia, i, 1.

117. Ibid., ii, 7.

et illos fortiter amat et 'operibus,' inquit, 'doloribus, damnis exagitantur, ut verum colligant robur.'"¹¹⁸ God hardens, reviews and disciplines those "quos amat."¹¹⁹ And he says that he has trained his will to obey God submissively in the trials and troubles of life: "In omnibus, quae adversa videntur et dura, sic formatus sum: non pareo deo, sed adsentior."¹²⁰ "Ex animo illum, non quia necesse est, sequor."¹²¹ It would be well for Lucilius to recognize His guiding hand also: "Optimum est pati, quod emandare non possis, et deum quo auctore cuncta proveniunt, sine murmuratione comitari."¹²² A truly worthy gem is found in a passage where Seneca says true freedom means serving God, "Deo parere libertas est."¹²³ Summing up man's moral responsibilities, "habebit illud in animo vetus praeceptum: 'Deum sequere.'"¹²⁴ We cannot help drawing attention here to the likeness of the same sentiment so often expressed in Holy Scripture. The Old Testament abounds¹²⁵ in admonitions similar to this pagan

118. De Providentia, ii, 6.

119. Ibid., iv, 7.

120. Ibid., v, 7.

121. Ibid., v, 7.

Ep. xcvi, 2.

122. Ep. cvii, 9.

123. De Vita Beata, xv, 6.

124. Ibid., xv, 6.

Boethius (De Consolatione, i, 4.) credits this maxim to Pythagoras. Cicero to one of the Seven Sages (De Finibus, iii, 22; iv.).

125. Cf. Ps. xxiii, 6.

Ps. xxvi, 8.

Ps. lxviii, 33.

Ps. cvi, 4.

dictum. Even a greater similarity is noticeable in the words of the Son of God Himself, when He invites us, "veni, sequere me;"¹²⁶ as also those of His apostles who were glad to reply, "et secuti sumus te."

Now did Seneca stop here, he surely could be taken for one of the Christian apologists. But we hasten to add that the resemblance, however striking, between Senecan phrases and Christian literature is nothing but a marvelous coincidence. As indicative of his credence in the true God or as having accurate conceptions of His nature, the apparent Christian phrases of Seneca should bear no more weight than his prophecy concerning the discovery of the great New World.¹²⁷ He states both ideas with the same attitude of uncertainty and as being up to the opinion of anyone considering the subjects. In his system of eclectic thought each subject was something novel and, as far as he could see, about as possible as the grata dicta made by other philosophers. His expressions of belief in God must not be taken for more than they are actually worth.¹²⁸ The crux of the issue would be: are his ideas, his spirit, Christian? His definition and explanation of the word deus will throw considerable light on just what he revered in the divinity.

126. Matt. xix, 21.

127. Med. 370.

128. C.T. Cruttwell, A History of Roman Literature, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1886). p. 388.

Seneca's various meanings for the word deus include the following: a) "(Deus), mundus cuncta complectens rectorque universi";¹²⁹ b) "Sic nunc Naturam voca, Fatum, Fortunam; omnia eiusdem dei nomina sunt varie utentis sua potestate";¹³⁰ c) more in a pantheistic line, he says that "when you say Nature, you merely give another name to God, for Nature is God and the Divine Reason that pervades the whole universe and all its parts: you may call him 'Iovem Optimum ac Maximum,' 'Tonantem et Statorem,' 'Liberum Patrem,' 'Herculem,' 'Mercurium,' and even if you name Him 'Fatum,' 'non mentieris.'"¹³¹ In fine, "any name that you choose will be properly applied to Him if it connotes some force that operates in the domain of heaven--His titles may be as countless as His benefits."¹³²

His inquiries into the nature and activity of God give somewhat of an introduction to the pantheistic and at times agnostic theories which he entertained concerning the Divinity. We must seek to discover what God is; whether He gazes indifferently and without concern upon the works of His creation or actually controls them.¹³³ Possibly in a moment of sadness Seneca chose to adopt the negative thesis as indicated by such

129. De Vita Beata, viii, 4.

130. De Beneficiis, iv, 8, 3.

131. Ibid., iv, 7, 1.

132. Ibid., iv, 8, 3.

133. De Otio, iv, 2.

statements as, God is unconcerned about us and turns His back on the world; that our good deeds mean no more to Him than our failure to pursue virtue.¹³⁴ That his God did not exist as a personality, is clearly brought out in both the sense and grammatical construction of such expressions as: "Nempe universa ex materia et ex deo constant...Quod facit, quod est deus...."¹³⁵ The word "quod" can be rendered only as "that which", possibly in the sense of "whatever it is which"; in any case a definitely neuter term indicative of a non-intelligent material force.

That Seneca's theories on the existence of the true God did not hold his own complete faith is clearly brought out in the many rather unconscious references he makes to the "gods". The word "unconscious" is used here in the sense that although as an individual thinker he had delineated many of the attributes of the true God, Seneca was for all practical purposes strongly imbued with, and subconsciously in accord with all pagan conceptions of the plurality of gods. The "dii immortales" of almost every Latin writer antedating the complete triumph of Christianity, is a common expression throughout Seneca's works. If we are cautioned to keep in mind the "vetus praeceptum: 'deum sequere,"¹³⁶ we are also told that the man who so instructs us in

134. De Beneficiis, iv, 4, 1.

135. Ep. lxxv, 24.

136. De Vita Beata, xv, 6.
Cf. ante, p. 31.

arguing the case for the gods, "causam deorum agam."¹³⁷ If Seneca tells us that "parens noster", and "deus", and "providentia" is the custodian of man's welfare, he likewise says that man is indebted to "dis" for the "salutem, vitam, et spiritum."¹³⁸ "Deus" is worshipped by those who know Him, Seneca succinctly reminds us, but in fewer than a score of lines further on, we learn that "(Di)...nocere non possunt. Nec accipere iniuriam queunt nec facere."¹³⁹ "Pater deus", God our Father, may try our faithfulness by sufferings so we are taught; later the object of our reverence has taken on a plural aspect, "ceterum castigant quosdam et coercent et inrogant poenas et aliquando specie boni puniunt."¹⁴⁰

Egoism is, in fact, at the bottom of most of his precepts and theories. He admits, it is true, that there exists something which, if not superior to man is at least, out of the sphere of human life, and he calls it by the abstract term, "deus". As has been noted, he predicated supreme attributes to this being. Still, Seneca says that a good man differs from deus only in the element of time, "immo etiam necessitudo et similitudo, quoniam quidem bonus tempore tantum a deo differt."¹⁴¹ It will be made

137. De Providentia, i, 1.

138. De Beneficiis, ii, 30.

139. Ep. xcv, 48, 49.

140. Ibid., xcv, 50.

141. De Providentia, i, 6.

clear later, how Seneca opines that suicide "promittit ut parem deo faciat,"¹⁴² a more boastful assurance than any other system of philosophy attempted to make. He may refer to the "maiestatem", and the "bonitatem", of "qui praesident mundo,"¹⁴³ but we must also know that, "sapiens cum dis ex pari vivit."¹⁴⁴ Far from the humble attitude of a Christian, in his relations with the Creator, Seneca assumes the attitude of socius in his relations with God.¹⁴⁵

Seneca tells us that the best way to worship the gods is to believe in them to acknowledge their majesty and goodness, to imitate them.¹⁴⁶ Far otherwise are his sentiments, quoted by St. Augustine, from Seneca's lost work, Contra Superstitionem:

All these things, a wise man will observe for the law's sake, more than for the god's; and all this rabble of deities which the superstition of ages has gathered together, we are in such manner to adore, as to consider the worship to be rather matter of custom than of conscience.¹⁴⁷

Commenting hereon, St. Augustine says: "This illustrious

142. Ep. lxxxviii,

143. Ep. xcv, 50.

144. Ep. lix, 14.

145. Ep. liii, 11.

De Providentia, vi, 6.

Ibid., i, 5, 7.

146. Ep. xcv, 50.

147. "Contra Superstitionem", in De Civitate Dei, St. Augustine, Lib. vi, Cap. 10.

Senator worshipped what he disapproved, acted what he disliked, and adored what he condemned."¹⁴⁸ Fabius remarked that it was a great pity that he who could what he would did not always make the best choice. It were perhaps more correctly stated that he who could do what he would, would not always make the best choice.

Did Seneca consider this "sequere deum"¹⁴⁹ sufficiently important, he certainly would not have permitted himself to lapse into such glaring inconsistencies. The frequency with which he recurs to the subject gives us the impression that he aspired to know the truth. But as was noted earlier in this work, Seneca was the typical Roman thinker, fearful of the consequences of discovering truth; realizing the necessity of following logical convictions to their obvious conclusions and lacking the will-power to do so; and in general, handicapped by the first premise of an ergo that had to be reached. This latter was at all times to be governed by that bane of any upright standard of life, expediency. He was correct in his conviction that mere thoughts and dialectics on the subjects of the deity, purpose of life, etc., must be reduced to practice, or they meant nothing at all other than whiling away one's time on idle fancies. But Seneca

148. St. Augustine, De Civitate Dei, Lib. vi, Cap. 10.

149. De Vita Beata, xv, 7.

Cf. ante, p. 31, 34.

erred in throttling his own mental powers by making them subservient to convenient living. His thoughts must accomodate themselves to his actions--his deeds were made answerable to no ethical standard of morality. His was a system full of concessions.

CHAPTER V

SENECA'S IDEAS OF THE HUMAN SOUL

In studying the human soul, Seneca begins by saying that the soul "animus" of man is a living being, "animal", using the latter term in its generic sense. He says the soul is living because it effects our own existence as living beings, "ipse efficiat ut simus animalia";¹⁵⁰ that it is from the root word "anima" that the term soul (animal, which means a living being) takes its source, "cum ab illo animalia nomen hoc traxerint."¹⁵¹ Continuing to describe the essence of the soul, Seneca launches into arguments widely divergent in meaning. In strict accord with the tenets of the school of Epicurus, which maintained that the soul was composed of minute particles, atoms, diffused through the body¹⁵²--in other words that the soul was one with the body--Seneca says with questionable logic, "quae corporis bona sunt, corpora sunt: ergo et quae animi sunt. Nam et hoc corpus est."¹⁵³ The fact that the bodily goods are material because they are appreciated by the material body, in no wise proves Seneca's "ergo"; the misplaced second premise and the conclusion are dissociated from the first premise. His "nam" phrase

150. Ep. cxiii, 2.

151. Ibid., cxiii, 2.

152. Lucretius, De Rerum Natura, iii.

153. Ep. cvi, 4-5.

is purely a gratum dictum, an assertion and nothing more. Continuing, Seneca says man's good must be corporeal, since man himself is corporeal--"bonum hominis necesse est corpus sit, cum ipse sit corporalis."¹⁵⁴ From these two citations it is evident that Seneca affirms the material composition of the soul--he doesn't prove it as he pretends to do. "Animus corpus est,"¹⁵⁵ is exactly what he intends to say. Did Seneca believe in his own assertions? Was he himself convinced that he had proved the corporeal existence of the soul? This is hardly possible in view of the position he maintains throughout most of his works. Why then did he argue in the aforementioned vein? Judging from the inconsistencies appearing throughout the length and breadth of his philosophical teaching, we may assume that Seneca herein merely states an hypothesis. As in the case of his entire system, Seneca endeavors to prove actually nothing. Independent of the masters of philosophy as we have seen him above,¹⁵⁶ he composed his own credo--and allowed the same privilege to others.

Most of Senecan teachings on the composition and nature of the human soul are found in the treatise Ad Marciam de Consolatione. Therein he analyzes the soul of man, and attributes to

154. Ep. cvi, 5.

155. Ep. cvi, 4.

156. Cf. ante, p. 18 ff.

it activity and quality which can be possessed only by a spiritual or immaterial substance. First of all he gives us an intimation of the pre-existence of the soul before its union with the body. Once released, he tells us, from the weight of earthly dross (the body), the soul flies back ("revolant") more lightly to the place of its origin (leviores ad originem suam).¹⁵⁷ Again he says that the soul after death will be "restored to its first state," in integrum restitui,¹⁵⁸ "unde demissus est."¹⁵⁹ It is nature that has bestowed on man his soul, or "entrusted it to man" (natura quae prior nobis credidit),¹⁶⁰ and Seneca asks concerning death, what hardship should it be in returning to the place from whence one has come, "reverti unde veneris quid grave est?"¹⁶¹ The soul animates the body, resides in it as in the darkness of gross matter and as something held therein by chains, "cetera...vincula animorum tenebraeque sunt."¹⁶² Out of its natural element, presumably the immaterial world of spirit, the soul is "crushed strangled, and stained" as it resides in the body, and is "kept far from its true and natural sphere," (obruitur, offocatur, inficitur, arcetur a veris et suis in falsa coiectus).¹⁶³ The souls of men find no joy lingering in

157. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xxiii, 1.

158. Ibid., xxi, 3.

159. Ibid., xxiv, 5.

160. De Tranquillitate Animi, xi, 3.

161. Ibid., xi, 4.

162. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xxiv, 5.

163. Ibid., xxiv, 5.

this earthly prison, and chafe against the narrow bounds of the body, "nec umquam magnis ingenis cara incorpore mora est; exire atque erumpere gestiunt, aegre has angustias ferunt,"¹⁶⁴ as they strive to attain the liberty and freedom of the universe to which they are accustomed, "vagi per omne, sublimes et ex alto adsueta humana despicere."¹⁶⁵

In man Seneca speaks of the soul as "ea pars quae melior est."¹⁶⁶ That property of a man which can neither be given away nor taken away by another--"quod proprium hominis est"¹⁶⁷-- is his rational soul, "animus et ratio in animo."¹⁶⁸ Man's thinking apparatus is his soul, for "rationale enim animal est homo."¹⁶⁹

164. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xxiii, 2.

165. Ibid., xxiii, 2.

166. De Constantia Sapientis, vi, 3.

167. Ep. xli, 8.

168. Ibid., xli, 8.

169. Ibid., xli, 8.

CHAPTER VI

SENECA ANALYZES CONSCIENCE

Closely allied with the subject of the nature of the soul of man is that faculty of the soul we term "conscience". Nowhere in the writing of antiquity has this inward voice of approval or condemnation been so graphically described, in itself and in its operations, as in the works of Seneca. Strange paradox as it may seem, Seneca maintains in no uncertain terms that we are accountable to conscience for the actions we perform. He implies the existence of conscience when he says there are some benefits that have a value even greater than life itself, "quaedam beneficia sunt maiora vita."¹⁷⁰ But there must be some judge who passes verdict on the relative values of the beneficia, and since what is good for one person is not necessarily good for another, this judge must be a personal arbiter, hence conscience. Nature has implanted within each one of us first of all a knowledge of what she orders, and then the conscious realization of the obligation of obeying these commands. We have an ingrained loathing for that which Nature has condemned, "infixa nobis eius rei aversatio est, quam natura damnavit."¹⁷¹ This inward light of correct living sees and passes judgment on both what we have done and

170. De Beneficiis, iii, x, 3.

171. Ep. xcvi, 16.

what we intend to do, "circumspexit quaeque fecit quaeque factururus est."¹⁷² And this inward judge has the attribute of never being deceived, "numquam fallitur."¹⁷³

The man who has drained the cup of iniquity, who has so imbibed of the poison of wickedness that sin is part of his very nature,¹⁷⁴ can have peace neither with himself nor with his fellow men. Conscience reveals him to himself and convicts him, "coarguit illum conscientia et ipsum sibi ostendit."¹⁷⁵ Good luck may free many from the punishment they have merited, but it spares no man the fear of retribution, "multos fortuna liberat poena, metu neiminem."¹⁷⁶ And while many crimes may of their nature evade the law (multa scelera legem effugiunt), none can flee the reproach of conscience. For it is the nature of guilt to be in fear, "proprium autem est nocentium trepidare."¹⁷⁷ Constant fear, constant terror and distrust of one's own security follow inevitably the path of the wrong-doer. We must agree, says Seneca, that "mala facinora conscientia flagellari et plurimum illi tormentorum esse eo, quod perpetua illam sollicitudo urget ac verberat."¹⁷⁸ A man lashed by an evil conscience may seek and find a place of safety, but never peace of mind, "tutum

172. De Clementia, xiii, 3.
 173. De Brevitate Vitae, x, 3.
 174. De Ira, i, xvi, 2-4.
 175. Ep. xcvi, 16.
 176. Ibid., xcvi, 15.
 177. Ibid., xcvi, 16.
 178. Ibid., xcvi, 15.

aliqua res...praestat, nulla securum."¹⁷⁹ Asleep, he is troubled "inter somnos movetur";¹⁸⁰ and in his waking hours he is more hateful to himself than he is to others, "invisior sibi quam servientibus."¹⁸¹ He lives in terror of death, "saepe mortem timet",¹⁸² but still he longs to be freed from the "conscientiae tormentes" and prays for death to come.¹⁸³ Such phrases, indeed, clearly bear witness to the fact that a pagan must have endured a type of living agony in pursuit of vice, and must have stilled the voice of conscience by the more horrible alternative of completely steeping himself in wickedness. The incomparable force with which Seneca depicts the operations of this internal custodian of Nature's laws, permits of the well-founded assumption that in his life at the court of the Caesars, Seneca himself must have experienced these moral headaches time and again.

As terrible as are the reproaches of conscience, so great are the joys of its approving nod. He does great things, maintains Seneca, who teaches how secure and free is the blessing of a good conscience, "quam tutum gratuitumque bonum sit bona conscientia."¹⁸⁴ If it is the fate of a wicked man to wish death that he might be freed from the internal stings of his soul, so

179. Ep. cv, 8.

180. Ibid., cv, 8.

181. De Clementia, xiii, 3.

182. Ibid., xiii, 3.

183. Ibid., xiii, 3.

De Ira, i, xvi, 3-4.

184. De Tranquillitate Animi, iii, 4.

by the same token we must realize the value of peace of mind. It is preferable to even life itself, "mors potior sit tamquam mens bona."¹⁸⁵

Whereas a bad conscience seeks to hide itself and suffers anxiety even in solitude, a good conscience gladly welcomes the crowd, "bona conscientia turbam advocat."¹⁸⁶

Death, as it actually approaches, presents a harrowing spectacle for those troubled with fear for their evil deeds. They endeavor to direct their thoughts away from their many ill-spent hours, and their multiplied vices. If they review the past, at once the wickedness of their lives comes before them with its accompanying reproach. Only those can look back fearlessly whose acts have been subjected to the censorship of conscience, "omnia acta sunt sub censura sua."¹⁸⁷ On the other hand, Seneca tells us that at death one can bear witness to himself that he has loved a good conscience and all good endeavor, "testatus exibo bonam me conscientiam amasse bona studia."¹⁸⁸ Then indeed such a man is following the path towards the gods, "ad deos iter faciet."¹⁸⁹

185. De Beneficiis, i, xi, 4.

186. Ep. xliii, 5.

187. De Brevitate Vitae, x, 3.

188. De Vita Beata, xx, 5.

189. Ibid., xx, 5.

CHAPTER VII

VIRTUE AND THE SUMMUM BONUM OF SENECA'S PHILOSOPHY

Though he differs radically with Stoic thought on many aspects of the soul, Seneca is strictly in accord with orthodox teaching concerning the summum bonum of man. Preliminary to his discussion of right living, Seneca tells us that "nunc veritatem ...quaerimus",¹⁹⁰ that the two strong supports of the soul are trust in the truth and confidence, "duae res plurimum roboris animo dant, fides veri et fiducia."¹⁹¹ Happiness is out of the question for one who has been thrust outside the pale of truth, "extra veritatem proiectus."¹⁹² In fine "unless I could attain the truth, it were not worth being born," he writes.¹⁹³

"It takes the whole of life to learn how to live,"¹⁹⁴ he says, and he pities the rabble which flows along in a sort of mechanical existence "nesciens vivere."¹⁹⁵ In a number of beautiful phrases Seneca admonishes us to live life to the fullest. It happens, he says, that often a man very old in years has no evidence to prove that he has lived long, save his wrinkles and gray hair.¹⁹⁶ Such a man has not lived long (vixit),

190. De Otio, iii, 1.

191. Ep. xciv, 46.

192. De Vita Beata, v, 2.

193. Naturales Quaestiones, praef.

194. De Brevitate Vitae, vii, 3.

195. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, x, 4.

196. De Tranquillitate Animi, iii, 8.

he has existed long (fuit); he has done not much voyaging (navigavit), but much tossing about (iactatus est).¹⁹⁷ Consider a man worth as much as his virtue; do not inquire how old he is, "incipere virtutibus illum non annis aestimare."¹⁹⁸ Long life is not an essential for intrinsic worth, for just as a man of small stature may be a perfect man, so in a few years of life one may attain not the furthestmost, but the most important goal.¹⁹⁹ For as Seneca mused in his own waning years, if another year were added to life, "fuisset simile praeterito."²⁰⁰ A full life is really a long life, regardless of how short a span of years it may include. The thing to be striven for is not to live long but to live rightly. As a matter of fact, this is the only element we have in our control; to live long one depends on Fate only; to live rightly, on his own soul.²⁰¹ Perhaps it was with a sardonic smile that Seneca in his old age mused over the gross inconsistency between his own lofty ideals and his weak-kneed failure to live according to principle: "The point is not how long you live, but how nobly you live. And often this living nobly means that you cannot live long" (quam bene vivas refert non quam diu; saepe autem in hoc est bene, ne diu).²⁰² The

197. De Brevitate Vitae, vii, 10.

198. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xxiv, 1.

199. Ep. xciii, 8.

Ep. lxx, 12.

De Beneficiis, v, xvii, 2-7.

200. Ep. xciii, 8.

201. Ibid., xciii, 2.

202. Ep. ci, 15.

life of a dissolute is really not life at all. Seneca tells us of Heraclitus who wept bitterly on seeing the wretched death (immo male pereuntium).²⁰³ And he quotes Curius Dentatus as "preferring to be a dead man than a live one dead; for the worst of all ills is to leave the number of the living before you die" (se esse mortuum quam vivere; ultimum malorum est e vivorum numero exire, antequam moriaris).²⁰⁴

Beginning the subject of living to the fullest, Seneca writes that life "nec bonum nec malum est; boni ac mali locus est;"²⁰⁵ that it is neither a good nor an evil but a place where both good and evil exist, and it is up to each individual to set his own standards. He tells us, "We must set before our eyes the goal of the supreme good, towards which we may strive, and to which all our acts and words may have reference--just as sailors must guide their course according to a certain star. Life without ideals is erratic: as soon as an ideal is to be set up, doctrines begin to be necessary":

Proponamus oportet finem summi boni, ad quem nitamur, ad quem omne factum nostrum dictumque respiciat; veluti navigantibus ad aliquod sidus derigendus est cursus. Vita sine proposito vaga est: quod si utique proponendum est, incipiunt necessaria esse decreta.²⁰⁶

Then comes the "decreta". The epitome of Stoic perfection was

203. De Ira, ii, 10, 5.

204. De Tranquillitate Animi, v, 5.

205. Ep. xcix, 12.

206. Ep. xcv, 45, 46.

"living according to nature," the preservation of harmony of soul, "concordia animi."²⁰⁷ One who adhered to this principle in all the situations of life possessed "virtus". The following are the general definitions and qualifications of a virtuous soul:

"asperis blandisque quem nec adtollent...ordinatissimus cum decore...sanus...inperturbatus, intrepidus...fortuita nec depri-
mant;" such a soul is virtue itself, "talis animus virtus
est."²⁰⁸ But Seneca does not mean to imply that a virtuous man

is insensible to hardships, "non sentit illa."²⁰⁹ "Again and again, I must remind you," he writes, "that I am speaking not of the ideal wise man, but of the man who with all his imperfections desires to follow the perfect path (honestam viam), and yet has passions that are often reluctant to obey."²¹⁰ This man rises

"calm and unmoved" (quietus placidusque) to meet whatever assails him. No proof of virtue is ever mild, "numquam virtutis molle documentum est."²¹¹ He counts the struggle entailed, as mere

training, "omnia adversa exercitationes putat."²¹² And if one be lashed and torn by Fortune, he should look upon himself not as the object of the cruelty of the Fates, but rather as engag-

207. De Beneficiis, iv, 25, 1.

De Otio, v, 1.

De Vita Beata, viii, 6.

208. Ep. lxvi, 6.

209. De Providentia, ii, 2.

210. De Beneficiis, ii, xviii, 4.

211. De Providentia, iv, 12.

212. Ibid., ii, 2.

ing in a struggle, "quod quo saepius adierimus, fortiores erimus."²¹³ Disaster is virtue's opportunity, "calamitas virtutis occasio est."²¹⁴ Another aspect of bearing up with life is its shortness of duration, "magno animo brevia feramus incommoda;"²¹⁵ for we are no sooner engrossed in the struggle than death is upon us, "mortalitas aderit."²¹⁶ Such in summary are the divers descriptions of a virtuous man. Only such a man can be said to attain the "happy life" (et ego sine virtute nego beatam vitam posse constare.)²¹⁷

Those are mistaken who claim the events of life are either good or evil. Rather it is the soul in its ability to rise superior to the vicissitudes of existence, that can turn these events into a happy or a miserable life:

Errant enim, qui aut boni aliquid nobis aut malum iudicant tribuere Fortunam;...Valentior enim omni fortuna animus est et in utramque partem ipse res suas ducit beataeque ac miserae vitae sibi causa est.²¹⁸

It is the power of the soul to remain unconquerable; to stay aloof, as it were, "invicta vis animi,"²¹⁹ amid earthly surroundings; to endure for the sake of tantum praemium--"nos advocabimus patientiam, quos tantum praemium expectat, felicitis animi immota

213. De Providentia, iv, 12.

214. Ibid., iv, 6.

215. De Ira, iii, 43, 5.

216. Ibid., iii, 43, 5.

217. De Beneficiis, iv, 2, 3.

218. Ep. xcvi, 2.

219. De Vita Beata, iv, 2.

tranquillitas."²²⁰ The mind must experience no interruption of joy, "nec adtollens se unquam nec depremens."²²¹ This is the "vita beata" of the Stoics. Stated otherwise we have the "securus aspiciat"²²² attitude of the soul in the midst of the great commotions of nature around it; the "unus idemque inter diversa"²²³ definition of the immota cited above. This "vita beata" incidentally, is quite inclusive, graced as it is with "perpetua libertas; et nullius nec hominis nec dei timor."²²⁴

The virtue so well delineated, is the only immortal thing which falls to man's lot, "hoc unum contingit immortale mortalibus."²²⁵ Some of the more concrete or practical aspects of virtue are brought out when Seneca says that the virtuous man finds joy only in the present, and puts no trust whatever in the future, in so much as whoever leans on uncertainties can have no sure support.²²⁶ We gather that the summum bonum he had been speaking of, is immortale because it is an abstract quantity,

220. De Ira, ii, 12, 6.

221. De Tranquillitate Animi, ii, 4.

Ep. xli, 4.

De Beneficiis, iv, 1, 2.

De Constantia Sapientis, v, 5.

De Vita Beata, iv, 3.

Ibid., viii, 2.

222. De Constantia Sapientis, vi, 3.

223. Ibid., vi, 3.

224. Ep. xvii, 6.

225. Ep. xcvi, 9.

De Vita Beata, viii, 4.

226. De Beneficiis, vii, ii, 4.

therefore has no personality, and hence cannot be subject to death. When he uses phrases as "such a soul is virtue itself" or "God is virtue," he apparently means to attribute to the animus and deus the abstract qualities of goodness; and since the latter is just that, a quality, it has no material existence and hence is not subject to the laws of life and death. And in reverse order he seems to think of "virtus" as possessing the animate existence of that to which it has been attributed. The fact that he deems the virtuous intention as immortale, but the virtuous deed or the manifestation of this intention as deserving no other recognition than the mere passing sensation of having experienced pleasure--is brought out in his answer to Lucilius' question: "Interrogas, quid petam ex virtute? Ipsam. Nihil enim habet melius, ipsa pretium sui."²²⁷ Virtue itself is its own reward. Moreover, the true joy of a good man (sapiens) comes from within himself, "a se omne gaudium peteret,"²²⁸ for he has everything invested within himself, "omnia in se reposuit."²²⁹ Virtue establishes a friendship between the gods and men, he says, giving us to understand that there is some sort of relationship between our good deeds and the supernatural element.²³⁰ When Seneca says that "nulli non virtus et vivo et mortuo ret-

227. De Vita Beata, ix, 4.

228. Ad Helviam de Consolatione, v, 1.

229. De Constantia Sapientis, v, 4.

230. De Providentia, i, 5.

tulit gratiam,"²³¹ we can hardly assume that the "virtus mortuo rettulit gratiam" has reference to heaven or remuneration in the life hereafter for the good one has done here in mortal existence.²³² In view of his general attitude on the subject,

Seneca merely wants to indicate the good name one will leave behind him, the reputation and example of having been a "vir sapiens et virtuosus."

Taking strong issue with the Epicureans who would have their summum bonum consist in well-satisfied appetites during a life interspersed with a good deal of otium, this champion of Stoic rigidity severely criticizes their desire for pleasure.

"Voluptas fragilis est, brevis...in qua nihil est magnificum aut quod naturam hominis...deceat."²³³ He protests against the

"virtus" by the Epicureans in connection with the idea of pleasure. Virtue despises pleasure, treats it as an enemy, and recoils from it as far as it can.²³⁴ We learn that the "pleasure"

(voluptas) means only bodily satisfactions, when Seneca says that all our happiness should not be placed "in carne", because "bona illa sunt vera quae ratio dat."²³⁵ He does say, however, truly but as if it were a rather sheepish admission, that "what-

231. Ep. lxxix, 18.

232. Cf. post, 93 f.

233. De Beneficiis, vii, ii, 3.

234. Ibid., iv, ii, 4.

235. Ep. lxxiv, 16.

ever fortune should send my way will turn out for the best, but I prefer that what befalls me should be the more pleasant and agreeable things, and those which will be less troublesome to manage."²³⁶ Which may indicate one of two things. It might mean, in the first place, that he was willing to accept both the good and the hard things of life and would make the best out of them, although it were just human nature to find it easier to accept the more enjoyable happenings. On the other hand it might illustrate that while all his teaching on how to live and be a happy man by the practice of natural virtue, was a good thing in itself, nevertheless, there were circumstances when it would be greatly to his advantage to act otherwise. From all indications, it was quite definitely the latter view that Seneca took when he preferred the "faciliora ac iucundiora"; for he tells us quite bluntly, and more in accord with the spirit of Senecan than of the Stoic philosophy, that we should "observe and avoid long before it happens, anything that is likely to do us harm," (quodcumque laesurum est, multo ante quam accidat, speculare et a-verte).²³⁷

The opposite of virtue is evil. Having seen in what Seneca's virtue consisted, we might describe with considerable accuracy his ideas of evil. In dealing with the subject of evil,

236. De Vita Beata, xxv, 5.

237. Ep. xcvi, 7.

however, he is quite brief and holds opinions which are in complete accord with Scholastic philosophy. All vices, says Seneca, rebel against nature, they are a violation of the established order, "omnia vitia contra naturam pugnant, omnia debitum ordinem deserunt,"²³⁸ which is about as sage an expression as one will find among pagan moralists. He repeats the idea, but lends force to it by a contrast with the good order of virtue: "virtus secundum naturam est, vitia inimica et infesta sunt."²³⁹ And while there is "consensus atque unitas" where virtue is present, "dissident vitia".²⁴⁰ If man depends on his worst qualities to make him enjoy life, his will be a storm-tossed career full of uneasiness;²⁴¹ "such is the tyranny under which that man must live who surrenders to the bondage of any passion" (in tyrannide illi vivendum est in alicuius adfectus venienti servitutem).²⁴² A sort of "particular examen" is advocated by Seneca for the correction of personal failings, "hoc mihi satis est, cotidie aliquid ex vitiis meis demere et errores meos objurgare."²⁴³ While the idea is laudable, we venture to say it is not suggested as the result of Seneca's experience. The daily elimination of one fault is too optimistic a view of Seneca's will-power--

238. Ep. cxxii, 5.

239. Ep. 1, 9.

240. De Vita Beata, viii, 6.

241. Cf. post, p. 67.

242. De Ira, i, x, 2.

243. De Vita Beata, xvii, 3.

anybody's for that matter.

At its best the virtue of Seneca consists in an attitude of haughty, proud superiority in receiving the various conditions with which man's existence is fraught. "Contemnite", is the mental attitude advised, whether we be confronted with "dolorem", "paupertatem" or in general any type of "fortuna".²⁴⁴ The fear of death seems to be the only thing Seneca had difficulty in conquering. But, he says, "once we have death in our own power, we are in the power of nothing" (non sumus in ullius potestate, cum mors in nostra potestate sit).²⁴⁵ "Ferte fortiter,"²⁴⁶ he tells us, and from being equal to the gods,²⁴⁷ you will even surpass them, "hoc est quo deum anteceditis."²⁴⁸

244. De Providentia, vi, 6-8.

245. Ep. xci, 21.

De Providentia, vi, 6-8.

246. Ibid., vi, 6-8.

247. Ep. xli, 4.

248. De Providentia, vi, 6.

CHAPTER VIII

SENECA LIVING LIFE IN VIEW OF DEATH

Almost in Scriptural figure Seneca queries with reference to man: "Quid est homo?" He is but a vessel so frail that the slightest jar will break (quolibet quassu vas et quolibet fragile iactatu).²⁴⁹ Everything connected with human existence is short-lived and perishable, and is of its nature of temporary duration, (omnia humana brevia et caduca sunt et infiniti temporis nullam partem occupantia).²⁵⁰ Seneca terms life the most precious thing in the world (res pretiosissima), and condemns men for trifling with it and consuming it with frivolous pursuits. Often we fail to appreciate life as we should because it is an incorporeal thing, because sub oculos non venit, and for this reason "vilissima aestimatur, immo paene nullum eius pretium est."²⁵¹ Life is short, but even this short time allotted to us rushes by with such speed that at the end but few find they have really lived.²⁵² Life is short, but we make it so; nor do we have any lack of it, but are wasteful of it.²⁵³ "Vita brevis, etiam si dies noctesque bonae menti laboremus."²⁵⁴ Even should we recall to mind the ages of men who have lived the longest and

249. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xi, 3.

250. Ibid., xxi, 2.

251. De Brevitate Vitae, viii, 1.

252. Ibid., i, 1.

253. Ibid., i, 4.

254. De Vita Beata, i, 2.

in recalling them, desire such a lengthy existence, Seneca reminds us in this reverie that,

cum ad omne tempus dimiseris animum, nulla erit illa brevissimi longissimique aevi differentia, si inspecto quanto quis vixerit spatio comparaveris quanto non vixerit.²⁵⁵

Just what does one look forward to when thinking of death? This is what Seneca queries; and in his cold, material search for the answer, he opines that it is merely the final termination in a succession of events. The major portion of death has already passed, in so much as our past years are now in the hands of death.²⁵⁶ Why should one's last hour be said to bring death, when in reality it merely completes the death process? It is not the last drop that empties the water-clock, but all that which previously has flowed out. True, we reach death at that last moment, but we have been on the way a long time.²⁵⁷ Death wears us away, but it does not whirl us away, "carpit nos illa, non corripit."²⁵⁸ His phrase, "tota vita nihil aliud quam ad mortem iter est,"²⁵⁹ sums up the journey aspect of life.²⁶⁰ We have been placed on earth "ad brevissimum tempus," and should view our stay as a sojourn at an inn.²⁶¹ "Tacita labetur":²⁶² thus our

255. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xxi, 3.

256. Ep. i, 2.

257. Ep. xxiv, 20, 21.

258. Ep. cxx, 18.

259. Ad Polybium de Consolatione, xi, 1.

260. Ep. xcix, 7.

261. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xxi, 1.

262. De Brevitate Vitae, viii, 5.

Cf. Virgil, Georgics, iii, 66 Seq.

life will glide along. It will neither reverse nor check its course; nor will it remind one of its swiftness. The passing of our life-span will stop neither at the command of a king nor at the applause of the populace. As it started on the first day, so it will run along; nowhere will it turn aside, nowhere will it delay.²⁶³

Another view Seneca would take of our life-span is that of a good which has been loaned us. The wise man, he tells us, lives as one who has been lent to himself and who will return everything without sorrow when it is reclaimed. His possessions, even his personal faculties have been given him on sufferance.²⁶⁴ Our dear ones are granted to us not as permanent possessions but at loan.²⁶⁵ Some of these blessings which adorn life's stage will be recalled on the first day, others on the second, while others we shall be permitted to use till the end. Everything is for our use and enjoyment, but it must be remembered that all is subject to change and return to nature.²⁶⁶

In describing death, Seneca becomes truly picturesque in many of his expressions. The general theme is well summed up in his Epistle referring to life as being a preparation for death. Though wanting in the supernatural element, the passage is in

263. De Brevitate Vitae, viii, 5.

264. De Tranquillitate Animi, xi, 1.

265. Ad Polybium de Consolatione, x, 4.

266. Ad Marciam De Consolatione, x, 2.

substance thoroughly Christian. We quote:

As the mother's womb holds us for ten months, making us ready, not for the womb itself, but for the existence into which we seem to be sent forth when at last we are fitted to draw breath and live in the open; just so, throughout the years extending between infancy and old age, we are making ourselves ready for another birth. A different beginning, a different condition awaits us. We cannot yet, except at rare intervals, endure the light of heaven; therefore, look forward without fearing to that appointed hour,--the last hour of the body but not of the soul. Survey everything that lies about you, as if it were luggage in a guest-chamber. You must travel on. Nature strips you as bare at your departure as at your entrance. You may take away no more than you brought in; what is more, you must throw away the major portion of that which you brought with you--that which has been your last protection; you will be stripped of the flesh, and lose the blood which is suffused and circulated through your body; you will be stripped of bones and sinews, the framework of these transitory and feeble parts.²⁶⁷

Therefore to live life in view of death, this is what Seneca would admonish us to do. And while death is on the one hand the most certain of human destinies,²⁶⁸ on the other hand nothing could be more uncertain as to its actual approach. He cautions us to profit by the time granted us "sine dilatione", for no promise has been given of this night, "nay, even for this hour" (nihil de hodierna nocte promittitur--nimis magnam advectionem dedi--, nihil de hac hora. Festinandum est, instatur a

267. Ep. cii, 23.

268. Ep. lxvi, 42-43.

tergo).²⁶⁹

Remorseless Fate has assigned a limit to the lives of us all, but none of us knows how near he is to this limit. Seneca warns us concerning death that, "hodie fieri potest, quicquid umquam potest";²⁷⁰ whatever can happen at any time can happen today. It is easy to dispense an amount that is assigned, no matter how small it is;²⁷¹ but since there is no fixed count of our years, our present life must be guarded more carefully since it may fail we know not when.²⁷² Hence let us so order our minds as if we had come to the very end, "sic itaque formemus animum, tamquam ad extrema ventum sit. Nihil differamus."²⁷³ Daily, let us check our accounts, "cotidie cum vita paria faciamus";²⁷⁴ and let us so live that nothing that can happen shall be unexpected.²⁷⁵ And if God should be pleased to add another day we shall welcome it with glad hearts. That man is happiest, and is secure in his own possession of himself, who can await the morrow without apprehension. When a man has said, "I have lived!", every morning he arises he receives a bonus:

Crastinum si adiecerit deus, laeti recipiamus.

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269. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, x, 4.
Ad Polybium de Consolatione, ix, 9.
 270. Ep. lxxiii, 16.
 271. De Brevitate Vitae, viii, 3.
 272. Ep. xxvi, 7.
Ep. lxxiv, 3.
 273. Ep. ci, 7.
 274. Ibid., ci, 7.
 275. De Tranquillitate Animi, xi, 6.

Ille beatissimus est et securus sui possesor, qui crastinum sine sollicitudine expectat. Quisquis dixit "vixit," cotidie ad lucrum surgit.²⁷⁶

The wise man who has used his life to the fullest, who has not squandered any of it by neglect or wasteful living, will not hesitate to go to meet death with steady step.²⁷⁷

Seneca's ideas on the subject of life in view of death can perhaps best be illustrated by the description he gives of his own standards of living:

I am endeavoring to live every day as if it were a complete life. I do not indeed snatch it up as if it were my last; I do regard it, however, as if it might even be my last. The present letter is written to you with this in mind--as if death were about to call me away in the very act of writing. I am ready to depart, and I shall enjoy life just because I am not over-anxious as to the future date of my departure.²⁷⁸

276. Ep. xii, 9.

277. De Brevitate Vitae, xi, 2.

278. Ep. lxi, 2.

CHAPTER IX

SENECA'S THOUGHTS ON DEATH

We have seen in detail the philosophy which governed the life of Seneca, his motivating ideals (theory and practice), his attitude towards the Source of life in the universe, and his realization of the superior part of man's essence, the soul. A thorough understanding of these fundamental principles as influencing Seneca is necessary, before it is possible to get an intimate view of his mind on the subject of death. If he recognizes a God to Whom we are responsible for our deeds, doubtless he will also recognize some standard of morality, to the observance of which some definite sanction is attached. Should his God be totally indifferent to the material world, our deeds will be accountable only to ourselves for sanction.

If Seneca's summum bonum is attained while man is in existence on earth, then death will mean little other than the cessation of this good and man's passing into oblivion. Pleasure, depending on his point of view, is what every philosopher sought. Entirely contingent on his theses concerning God, the existence of the soul, and its nature, did each of them formulate codes of virtue and catalogues of vice. A standard of life which sought none other than present physical well-being would naturally delineate virtue as a purely convenient quality. Vice on the other hand, was said to be evil only in so far as it entailed suffering. Each, virtue and vice, would contain its own imme-

diate reward or punishment. In fine it was necessary to investigate and discover just what conscious relations Seneca had with the spiritual or immaterial world. This we have done; now we shall endeavor to describe his position on the subjects of death, existence after death and immortality.

Perhaps the strongest natural instinct in man is the love of his own life, his eagerness to continue in existence. To promote the realization of this craving, man has also been endowed with an innate urge to self-preservation. Only the gaining of a more valuable possession as proposed by the mind can influence man to disregard this natural law to insure his physical well-being. That such a good may exist is distinctly implied in Seneca's question pertaining to blessings greater than life:

"Quid quod quaedam vitae beneficia sunt et maiora vita?"²⁷⁹ He

says that as regards the libertas, pudicitia, and mens bona (a good conscience), we are indeed able to live without them, but that death becomes preferable, "sine quibus possumus quidem vivere, sed ut mors potior sit."²⁸⁰ It is more honorable to meet

death in the line of duty than by avoiding it to prove traitors to our cause: "Quanti viri est!...cum praemia proditiōis ingentia ostendantur praemium fidei mortem concupiscere."²⁸¹ But

279. De Beneficiis, iii, x, 3.

280. Ibid., i, xi, 4.

281. Ibid., iii, xxv, 1.

the inherent worth of such goods can only be enhanced by the well-nigh supreme value that has been placed on them. It is, therefore, the universal testimony of mankind in all ages and all places that bears out this precept of the natural law that man endeavors to protect his life. And in proportion as man is impelled to the desire of continued life, so is he stricken with that fear of all fears, the dread of ceasing to live--the fear of death. And since the urge to live is supplanted only by the recognition of a higher good, so the fear of death is alleviated solely by the appreciation one conceives for a greater benefit to be obtained in dying.

In his accounts of the last moments of life and explanations of the certainty of death with its accompanying uncertain elements, Seneca uses terms that are as keen in perception and beautiful in analysis as any others written in Latin. Few if any of the poets have as realistically described death as Seneca, and at the same time maintained his beauty of expression. Did he have the ideals of Christianity to permeate the purely natural outlook he takes, Seneca would, indeed, rank among the literary lights of the Christian Church. Many of his expressions bear a remarkable parallel to the words of Holy Scripture; but rather than indicate any Christian influence on Seneca, they serve but to illustrate how the Church applies the supernatural viewpoint to many of the natural events of life, how she merely directs them to their supernatural end. Seneca's discussions on death

include: a) living one's life in preparedness for death; b) man's natural love of existence; c) the fear of death and the efforts man would take to avoid this event; d) the certainty of death as also the uncertainty of its time and circumstances; e) the lack of discrimination death shows towards youth or age; f) whether death be a good or an evil; g) suicide; h) and continued existence after death. The subject will be studied in topics in the order mentioned.

Throughout the writings of Seneca there is no other thought which more persistently recurs than the subject of death and life hereafter. The thought impresses the reader that regardless of what matter Seneca may be dealing with, there inevitably creeps into the discussion death, as though it were the pervading element of the topic. Which fact illustrates the contention that Seneca was a deep-thinking man who saw and realized long ahead of time the final mortality which awaits the things of earth. There is no one so ignorant as not to know we must sometime die, he wrote, "nemo tam imperitus est, ut nesciat quandoque moriendum."²⁸² This fact also brings out, in spite of his multiplied arguments to the contrary, that while the many disagreeable situations of life could be forestalled or meliorated (even by the sacrifice of principles), and that while dread of consequences for this or that action might be rationalized away, still

282. Ep. lxxvii, 11.

that terrible, inexplicable, but positive fear of death seemed mockingly to triumph over all his philosophizing.²⁸³ So definitely is this the case that Seneca tells us that once we have the fear of death in our power, we shall even surpass the gods.²⁸⁴ And, therefore, save in the one instance we have quoted when a greater good than self-preservation is proposed to the mind, his one remedy for this fear is "mortem contemnere."²⁸⁵ Like a man frightened out of his senses going through an old mansion, he would reassure himself by shouting, laughing at the thing feared, in the attempt to deceive himself that it was by a nothing that he had been frightened, "nosmet ipsi fallamus."²⁸⁶ "I shall look upon death as a comedy with the same expression of countenance," says Seneca, in the attempt to conceal his actual fear.²⁸⁷ Endeavoring to dismiss with a shrug of the shoulders the natural dread of death, Seneca says that death is after all an insignificant trifle over which men unduly trouble themselves, "minimum est, de quo sollicitissime agitur."²⁸⁸ He says the fear of death is the bane of one's existence, the curse which lays a curse on everything else, "miserrimus ac miserrima omnia

283. De Beneficiis, v, xvii, 2-7.

284. Cf. ante, pp. 35, 55.

Ep. xli, 4.

De Providentia, vi, 6.

285. Ep. xxxvi, 8.

286. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xix, 1.

287. De Vita Beata, xx, 3.

288. Ep. xciii, 12.

efficiens metus mortis."²⁸⁹

In line with a more natural point of view he asks if there is anyone who doesn't shrink from departure from life,²⁹⁰ and replies to his own query in answering that "animos nostros offendat."²⁹¹ He shows a remarkable keenness of perception in analyzing the fear of dying experienced by a man stricken with disease. "Dread of death does not come from your disease," he writes, "that is a fear of nature" (hoc unum dicam, non morbi hunc esse sed naturae metum).²⁹² With regard to those in old age, ill health, or other circumstances which would indicate the proximity of death, Seneca says that knowing in a more realistic manner that they must die, "nesciat quandoque moriendum,"²⁹³ they nevertheless turn to flight, tremble and lament, "tamen cum prope accessit, tergiversatur, tremit, plorat."²⁹⁴ Indeed, when the mask is removed, the Stoic or Senecan mask of indifference, it is found that everyone has this innate fear of death, "quemcumque vis occupa, adulescentem senem medium; invenies aequae timidum mortis, aequae inscium vitae."²⁹⁵ In fact the very

289. Ep. ci, 10.

290. De Beneficiis, v, xvii, 2.

291. Ep. xxxvi, 8.

292. Ep. lxxviii, 6-7.

293. Ep. lxxvii, 11.

294. Ibid., lxxvii, 11.

De Brevitate Vitae, xi, 1.

295. Ep. xxii, 14.

fear of dying is often the psychological cause of men's deaths, "saepe enim causa moriendi est timide mori."²⁹⁶ This fear of death is the cause of the greatest discontent among men, "illa vero maxima ex omni mortalium populo turba miserorum, quam expectatio mortis exagitat undique inpendens."²⁹⁷

Thus it is throughout the length and breadth of his commentaries on death; the underlying reason for all his explanations, admonitions and words of counsel is to remove this overshadowing fear of death. Seneca was superior to his age in so much as he did not live entirely for the present. True, he tells us to live in the present, for we can rely on nothing in the future; but far from revealing his own conviction in the matter, it illustrates how he is trying to explain away his own conception of the ultimate passing of all things. In so much as he could not forecast the future, its uncertainty held a sort of dread for him; hence, he more stringently disciplined himself to be indifferent to whatever might arise. In one frank statement, he implies the extent of this fear when says that a man in his hour of death requires tenacious courage of soul, and this only the wise man can manifest, "at illa, quae in propinquo est utique ventura, disiderant lentam animi firmitatem, quae est rarior

296. De Tranquillitate Animi, xi, 5.

297. Ep. lxxiv, 3.

nec potest nisi a sapiente praestari."²⁹⁸

The cause of this fear of death is rightfully recognized by Seneca as being man's desire to live. At no time does he deny the natural clinging to life evidenced by the extreme measures one takes to preserve it. But since in nourishing this desire one must also face the realization and consequent fear of approaching death, Seneca would have us try to be indifferent towards life itself. Rather than have the pleasure of living with the dread of dying, he would sacrifice the former in the endeavor to dismiss the latter. There is only one chain which binds us to life, he tells us, and that chain is the love we have for life; this chain may not be cast off, but it may be rubbed away, "una est catena, quae nos alligatos tenet, amor vitae, qui ut non est abiciendus, ita minuendus est."²⁹⁹ In almost Scholastic phrasing we are told that nature has molded our souls so that they naturally love their own existence, "animos...quos in amorem sui natura formavit,"³⁰⁰ and that all men tend to preserve themselves in life, "sicut feruntur omnes ad conservationem sui."³⁰¹ Seneca makes a graphic as well as accurate comparison when he likens a man clinging to life to a person being carried

298. Ep. xxx, 8.

Ep. lxxvii, 11.

299. Ep. xxvi, 10.

300. Ep. xxxvi, 9.

301. Ibid., xxxvi, 9.

down a rushing stream trying to catch hold of the briars and sharp rocks as he is swept downward, "multi sic conplectuntur et tenent, quomodo qui aqua torrente rapiuntur spinas et aspera."³⁰² Everyone seems anxious to live long; then when people are well up in years, they try to stave off the thought of death by deceiving themselves that they are much younger,

Vide quam cupiant diu vivere! Decrepiti senes paucorum annorum accessionem votis mendicant; minores natu se ipsos esse fingunt; mendacio sibi blandiuntur et tam libenter se fallunt quam si una fata decipiant.³⁰³

As death approaches, man greatly fears and endeavors to avoid it.³⁰⁴ And still, while so accurately testifying to man's natural desire to live, the many admonitions he gives us on how to regard death are all for the purpose of overcoming this desire. Seneca would sacrifice the love of life that he might be somewhat freed of the fear of its loss. Such a procedure is hardly living "secundum naturam", but it does go towards making death less dreadful. Epistle CI, takes up the laments of Maecenas as he is on his death bed. The great patron had written that he would gladly suffer prolonged physical pain, were his death but postponed awhile. Seneca heaps scorn on this cringing prayer of Maecenas, saying after a bit of severe criticism, that Maecenas

302. Ep. iv, 5.

303. De Brevitate Vitae, xi, 1.

304. Ep. lxxvii, 11.

seemed to think that in asking for continued suffering he were actually seeking a continuance of life, "optatur et tamquam vita petitur supplicii mora."³⁰⁵

Granted that the love of life is natural, that the fear of death is natural, it must be remembered it was in Seneca's philosophy to desire that which entailed the least suffering and inconvenience. What, therefore, would be his attitude towards this fear of closing life, what would be his remedy for this situation? The attempt to rid oneself of the fear of death is two-fold in its nature. The first part consists in an attempt to deceive oneself as to the nature of death, laugh at it, scorn the idea that death can subdue man; and the second is an attempt to appeal to logic and cold reason that since death has been decreed for us, it should be accepted with Stoic gravity, with no more or less disturbance of soul than any other event which comes our way.

"Nam nemo illam bene rexit nisi qui contemserat."³⁰⁶

Thus sums up Seneca his own mental attitude toward death. He knew not what was beyond; he felt that there would be something to meet, but he was sure only of the past and of the present. Therefore, this Roman pragmatist would follow his own advice and

305. Ep. ci, 12.

306. Ep. cxi, 5.

take care of everything in his power, life and death. What lay beyond was out of the sphere of his eminently practical mind.

"Ego mortem eodem voltu comoediamque videbo"³⁰⁷ would be his expression on his own death bed. He who fears death will never do anything worthy of a man.³⁰⁸ "Contemne mortem,"³⁰⁹ he tells us and once you have overcome the fear of death there is no sorrow in life, "Nihil triste est, cum huius metum effugimus."³¹⁰

The highlight of Stoic morality was the living according to nature, but as we have so often seen Seneca interprets Stoicism to mean rather the recognition of the laws of nature in man's regard and the adapting oneself to these laws so as to bring about the least painful experiences. Senecan morality in no wise cautions us to observe the laws of nature for the sake of objective righteousness. We have seen that both in theory and practice he adapted principles to circumstances rather than make his standard of rectitude hold good regardless of circumstances.

That Seneca was aware of the fact that there existed an objective standard of truth, and likewise that he fully realized the grave inconsistencies between his own life and such a standard, is evidenced in his analysis of the mental attitude of a man

307. De Vita Beata, xx, 3.

308. De Tranquillitate Animi, xi, 6.

309. Ep. xxxvi, 8.

Ep. lxxviii, 5.

310. Ep. lxxviii, 5-6.

Ep. xci, 21.

Ep. xxx, 3.

on his death bed. In such circumstances, one draws up his will as an "incorruptum iudicem."³¹¹ Never do we wrestle more in making decisions than when with death staring us in the face; with all self-interest banished (remotis utilitatibus), only the ideal of good remains before our eyes (solum ante oculos honestum stetit).³¹² We dispose of our material goods in a disinterested manner--perhaps for the first time--after seeking those most worthy of inheriting our possession, "quaerimus dignissimos". For now what difference does it make to whom we give since no one will make us any return?, "quid enim interest, quibus demus a nullo recepturi?"³¹³ Implied herein is Seneca's confession that his life was guided by such motives as the "utilitas", and the principle of acting for personal gain alone. These phrases likewise carry Seneca's implied condemnation of such a manner of life.

On the subject of death, it has been noted that Seneca goes to great length endeavoring either to do away with the fear of death or to acquire the courage necessary to bear this affliction commendably. Recalling one of the general tenets of his system, we remember the word of advice he gave to Lucilius: "Observe and avoid long before it happens, anything that is likely to do you harm" (quodcumque laesurum est, multo ante quam accidat speculari

311. De Beneficiis, iv, xi, 5.

312. Ibid., iv, xi, 4.

313. Ibid., iv, xi, 4.

et averte).³¹⁴ The inevitability of death preoccupied Seneca all his life, much of which was spent in avoiding this very obvious "quod laesurum est". Whatever may be said of Seneca's inconsistency in his teachings, he must be given credit for facing the truth. If an unpleasant condition arose, he surely endeavored to get around it some way or another; but unlike the incredulous of today, Seneca in his saner moments refused to deny the existence of conditions such as they are. It is foolish to fear death, he says, since men simply must await what is sure. They should fear only what is uncertain, "Quam ideo timere dementis est, quia certa expectantur, dubia metuuntur."³¹⁵ Our minds must be ever in readiness, never fearing "id quod necesse est," but always ready for whatever may be (quod incertum est).³¹⁶ Seneca becomes truly poetic and certainly uses the clearest of logic in discussing the certainty of death.

"Morti natus es,"³¹⁷ completely tells us what was in Seneca's mind concerning the end of man. This is the condition under which man comes into the world. Parents know this; and if with this knowledge they still bring forth children, they must be reconciled to the fact that they are the remote instruments of placing their offspring in the path of death.³¹⁸ For mortals

314. Ep. xcvi, 7.

315. Ep. xxx, 11.

316. Ad Polybium de Consolatione, xi, 3.

317. De Tranquillitate Animi, i, 13.

318. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xvii, 7.

Ad Polybium de Consolatione, xi, 3.

can but beget their like: "Mortalis nata es, mortales peperisti."³¹⁹ Our death is proclaimed at our birth, "mors enim illi denuntiata nascenti est,"³²⁰ and everyone who is privileged to be born is destined to die, "cui nasci contigit, mori restat."³²¹ Whoever complains about the death of anyone, is merely complaining that he was a man, "(flet) quisquis aliquem queritur mortuum esse, queritur hominem fuisse."³²² For life has been granted us only on the condition that we must die. Therefore, he who would find fault with death, cannot wish to have lived, "vivere noluit, qui mori non vult,"³²³ since no one is able to be born without paying the penalty for being human, "nulli contigit impune nasci."³²⁴ And, indeed, amid the turmoil of earthly pursuits, nothing is certain regarding man save the fact that he will die: "in tanta volutatione rerum humanarum nihil cuiquam nisi mors certum est."³²⁵

Some people think that in living longer this continuance of life enables them to avoid death. They look upon the death of a young person as being premature. There is strictly speaking no

319. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xi, 1.

320. Ibid., x, 5.

321. Ep. xcix, 8.

De Beneficiis, iii, xxxi, 2.

De Tranquillitate Animi, xi, 6.

322. Ep. xcix, 8.

323. Ep. xxx, 10.

324. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xv, 4.

Ad Polybium de Consolatione, xi, 3.

Ibid., i, 1.

325. Ep. xcix, 9.

such thing as a premature death, and no matter how a person lives he cannot escape the inevitable lot of man.³²⁶ Moreover death is no respecter of persons whether as pertains to age³²⁷ or station in life.³²⁸ Neither are we summoned according to our rating on the censor's list, "non citamur ex censu."³²⁹

With keen insight into the psychology of the mind, Seneca tells those who are ill that "you will die not because you are ill, but because you are alive; even when you have been cured, the same end awaits you; when you have recovered, it will not be death but ill health, that you have escaped" (morieris, non quia aegrotas, sed quia vivis. Ista te res et sanatum manet; cum convaleris, non mortem, sed valetudinem effugies).³³⁰ Death has its fixed rule equal and unavoidable, "aequam et invictam."³³¹

Associating the supernatural element with the subject of death, Seneca would give the impression that the divinity, his Fata or Natura, has previous knowledge of the circumstances of the death of everyone, and has fixed the time limit of each one's

326. Ep. xciii, 12.

Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xi, 5.

Ep. xii, 6.

327. Ep. lxvi, 42.

Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xxi, 6.

Ep. xxvi, 7.

328. De Brevitate Vitae, viii, 5.

329. Ep. xii, 6.

330. Ep. lxxviii, 6.

331. Ep. xxx, 11.

Ep. lxvi, 43.

span of life. To suppose that the duration of man's life were controlled merely by blind chance, that the death of the young, unexpected deaths and the like happened for no reason at all, was just too much for the faith which dwelt in the breast of Pagan Seneca. His writings illustrate the fact that he felt someone or something controlled the number of man's years.

He quotes Demetrius when the latter addressed the gods, "Di immortales, vultis spiritum? Quidni? Nullam moram faciam, quo nimis recipiatis quod dedistis."³³² In saying "Fata nos ducunt," Seneca again attributes to the supernatural element the faculty of guiding the destinies of man, and he says that it was settled at the first hour of birth what length of time remains for each.³³³ Throughout our life, the Fates ply their work and keep us from being conscious that we are dying, so that death may steal upon us the more easily. As infancy changes into boyhood, boyhood into adolescence, followed by old age, death is always with us, lurking under the name of life.³³⁴ In coming into life we have entered "in regnum fortunae", and since she governs the length of our days, "durum atque invictum" is her law.³³⁵ Seneca consoles Polybius on the death of his brother saying that

332. De Providentia, v, 5.

333. Ibid., v, 7.

Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xii, 4.

334. Ibid., xxi, 6.

335. Ibid., x, 6.

while "rerum natura illum tibi dedit,"³³⁶ still nature has made it clear that she exempts no one from her stern law, "natura nulli se necessitatis suae gratiam facturam esse testata est."³³⁷

The termination of life is just where the remorseless law of fate has fixed it, "ubi illum inexorabilis fatorum necessitas fixit,"³³⁸ and all prayers and struggles, "vota ac studia," spent in trying to avoid death, "frustra sunt."³³⁹ At birth the time limit of each one's life is fixed, hence no one dies too soon since he lives only as long as he was destined to live; he has filled his capacity for living.³⁴⁰ Virgil's "Metasque dati pervenit ad aevi,"³⁴¹ is the authority for Seneca's statement. While he continuously dwells on the inevitability of death, throughout there is a tone of respect for the divinity as the master of the final disposition of man on earth. There is the intimation of an intelligent being directing man's destiny.

In one place Seneca states that, "now is the time for you to reflect, not only that all things are mortal, but also that their mortality is subject to no fixed law."³⁴² And again:

336. Ad Polybium de Consolatione, x, 4.

337. Ibid., xi, 1.

338. Ep. ci, 7.

339. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xxi, 6.

340. Ibid., xxi, 5.

Ibid., xxi, 6.

De Providentia, v, 7.

Ep. ci, 7.

341. Aeneid, x, 472.

342. Ep. lxiii, 16.

"there is no fixed count of our years."³⁴³ These statements seem in direct variance with all we have been told concerning the "fixus terminus cuique," "ex consilio," "naturae lege." In itself the inconsistency would fall right in line with the many discrepancies found in Senecan arguments, but unlike many others, this difficulty is readily explained. The "incerta lege" of Epistle LXIII, is "incerta" only in so far as man is concerned. We live, not knowing when the last hour will come upon us. But the implied contention is that subjective ignorance on our part has nothing to do with the objective existence of a law governing the length of time each individual shall live.

From a philosophical point of view the fact of death, the cessation of life, seems to have raised many questions in the mind of Seneca. "Mors quid est?"³⁴⁴ he asks, and shortly follows with his own answer. Death is either the end or a process of change, "aut finis aut transitus."³⁴⁵ In any case Seneca rightfully judges that it is not a state of existence or a condition: "Mors ad te venit; timenda erat, si tecum esse posset; sed necesse est aut non perveniat aut transeat."³⁴⁶ It occurs and has passed. Then there arises the obvious problem as with all things pertinent to the existence of man, is death a good or an evil? Seneca here presumes to convince us with the syllogism

343. Ep. xxvi, 7.

344. Ep. lxv, 24.

345. Ibid., lxv, 24.

346. Ep. iv, 3.

of Zeno, the founder of the Stoic school: "Nullum malum gloriosum est; mors autem gloriosa est; mors ergo non est malum."³⁴⁷ Exclaims Seneca, "Profecisti!"³⁴⁸ as he credits the master with the solution of the problem. Far from assuring us even of his own credence in such a groundless proof, Seneca gives us herein a note of his own cowardice, an illustration of his "let us deceive ourselves" attitude seen earlier in this paper.³⁴⁹ As evidence of his still doubting mind, we find many illustrations in his various works, the sole argument of which is an attempt to show that death is no evil. Though his writings are replete with this negative type of argument, we must look far before coming upon any reason at all for referring to death as "mors gloriosa." He terms death a blessing in so much as it releases us from our ills, "in malis optimum, supplicii finis"³⁵⁰ and he must even qualify this statement by saying those who do not view death as such are ignorant of their own ills, "O ignaros malorum suorum quibus non mors ut optimum inventum naturae laudatur expectaturque."³⁵¹ And he repeats the same point later in saying that, "nihil mali mors attulit; omnium etiam malorum remisit patientiam."³⁵² It is therefore only in view of man's liberation from

347. Ep. lxxxii, 9.

348. Ibid., lxxxii, 9.

349. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xix, 1.
Cf. ante, p. 66.

350. Ep. ci, 12.

351. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xx, 1.

352. Ibid., xx, 6.

the sufferings of life that death is to be looked upon as "gloriosum". For Seneca adhered to the strict Stoic teaching, that as considered in itself and independent of the good it may procure for man, "Mors nec bonum nec malum est."³⁵³ He explains this contention by saying that only "that which is something" (quod aliquid est) is able to be a good or an evil.

The wise man, the Stoic wise man, must apply to death all the mental attitudes with which he views other disagreeable necessities. If he has acquired true virtue, Stoic virtue, he will fear neither death nor the gods, knowing "mortem malum non esse, deos malo non esse."³⁵⁴ Just why death is no evil, well, it alone is the privilege of mankind, "sola ius aecum generis humani."³⁵⁵ Mere assertion proves nothing, hence it is concluded that the "privilege" aspect of death is merely its common aspect, and since what is in store for every man must come to each, death should be looked upon as a right. Somewhat in the same vein would be the argument that illness is common to mankind; hence, to bear it with patience one must cultivate the mental attitude that it is one of man's privileges. Seneca weakens somewhat in confessing, "mors inter illa est, quae mala quidem non sunt, tamen habent mali speciem."³⁵⁶ He fails as he so often does, to

353. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xix, 4.

354. Ep. lxxv, 17.

355. Ep. cxxiii, 16.

Ep. cxvii, 22.

356. Ep. lxxxii, 15.

show just how death has merely the semblance of evil, when in itself it surely contains, by his own admission, all the dread, the fear, the dislike which are entities of evils he recognizes as such. In death, Seneca tells us, there is "nullum incommodum"; for there must exist something to which it is harmful, "esse enim debet aliquid, cuius sit incommodum."³⁵⁷ The point made herein offers of several interpretations. If evil be considered as a condition or a state, such as ill health or poverty, then certainly "mors nullum habet incommodum," for death admittedly is no state, but merely the cessation of life in man. If on the other hand evil be viewed as anything from which human nature naturally rebels, then indeed, death may possibly be no evil, but not for the reason that it has no matter which it might affect. When Seneca holds that, "mala enim bonaque circa aliquam versantur materiam,"³⁵⁸ he exhibits rather shallow reasoning. For though man dies but once, the fear, the dread of this one event hangs like a pall over his entire life, serving as a controlling influence in many of the decisions he must make during that life. Again, if in stating "esse enim debet aliquid cuius sit incommodum," Seneca implies that death does not affect the body, he would maintain one of two views: either man is not living when death actually comes, and such an assumption is preposterous; or he

357. Ep. xxxvi, 10.

358. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xix, 4.

would hold that, with man still alive, the actual departure of the soul is no evil. All of which brings us back to the mere assertion, "mors ergo non est malum," without the semblance of proof or reason for holding this position. Summing up his theories regarding the morality of death, Seneca admits he is at his wits' end and as much as confesses that his philosophical vagaries were just that, vagaries. "Vides ipsam mortem nec malum esse nec bonum."³⁵⁹ The goodness or badness of death is not inherent in the act of dying. Death may be termed good or evil depending on the manner in which one dies and the reason for dying;³⁶⁰ just as the morality of any indifferent act takes on its aspect of sin or virtue in accordance with the circumstances and end proposed. "Cato illa honestissime usus est, turpissime Brutus,"³⁶¹ he says as illustrating the point.

In speaking of death, Seneca vouches several opinions on the subject of inflicting capital punishment. Readily does he admit of both its legality and in certain circumstances of its necessity. But his thoughts are permeated with an abundance of good judgment. "Ultima supplicia", he says are for "sceleribus ultimis."³⁶² And the "potestatem vitae necisque" should be prudently entrusted to a man who is calm in his decisions and

359. Ep. lxxxii, 13.

360. Ep. lxvii, 16.

361. Ep. lxxxii, 12.

362. De Ira, i, vi, 3.

never swayed by emotion.³⁶³ The executioner holds a position which requires that he bring the utmost caution to his task, "ad rem summa diligentia tractandam."³⁶⁴ Death is rightfully inflicted on public offenders for two reasons. First this extreme penalty serves as a warning to other would-be criminals, "ut documentum omnium sit;"³⁶⁵ and secondly, the death sentence metes out justice to those who, unwilling to be useful while alive, by their death are of service to the state.³⁶⁶ Seneca would have even the condemned man himself look upon his sentence as of benefit to himself.³⁶⁷

In the light of the teachings of Christianity under which we live, and imbued as we are with the philosophy of this school, we can view only with disgust the Stoic tenets advocating suicide. Generally speaking, the Stoics were sufficiently clear in their analysis to follow through to its conclusion the various principles of their school. And in nearly all cases their doctrines degenerated into a system of expedience, varying in law and privilege according to prevailing circumstances. Now while their conduct on the whole followed such lines, there was one phase of the code that certainly was believed by all and adhered

363. De Ira, i, xix, 8.

364. Ibid., i, xix, 8.

365. Ibid., i, vi, 4.

366. Ibid., i, vi, 4.

367. Ibid., i, vi, 3.

to by most. They would spend a great part of life sacrificing ideals and stooping to the most immoral conduct with the one end in view, to avoid suffering and death. But strangely enough, when their last resources had been exhausted, when no hope remained, when life had to be faced as it was, they calmly took their own lives. This being a convenient means of escape, the violence of its nature required more than ordinary rationalization of one's mind regarding the benefits to be derived from suicide. Seneca accordingly in many instances tries to convince himself that suicide is justifiable.

He informs us that a study of Socrates will teach one how to die if it be necessary, but that application to the words of Zeno will enable one to die before it is necessary, "Socrates te docebit mori si necesse erit, Zeno antequam necesse erit."³⁶⁸ Life with all its hardships is worth while only because death is always available, "caram te, vita, beneficio mortis habeo."³⁶⁹ By one step, "uno gradu," one may pass from the world of trial to that of freedom, "licet ad libertatem transire."³⁷⁰ During life it is the duty of a man to make himself agreeable to others; so Seneca believed, following the teachings of the Epicureans. But as to our death, one need please himself alone. The best type of

368. Ep. civ, 22.

369. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xx, 3.

370. Ibid., xx, 3.

death is the one we like: "Vitam et aliis adprobare quisque debet, mortem sibi. Optima est, quae placet."³⁷¹ In accordance with these words, he says that just as one selects his ship for a voyage, or a house when taking up his residence, so when he is ready, "eligam sic mortem exiturus e vita."³⁷² In the vicissitudes of life, many people pray for death. "Demens" is the word by which Seneca designates them. For just as against their will it has been settled that all must some day die, so the time of death is in their own hands. The former is a necessity, but the latter is a privilege: "invita positum est, ut cum voles, in tua manu est. Alterum tibi necesse est, alterum licet."³⁷³ He even goes further in saying that one often has the duty of destroying himself, "saepe mori debemus."³⁷⁴ In three instances,³⁷⁵ Seneca takes the trouble to enumerate the various ways and means of committing suicide, pointing out the vital parts of the body. He offers the additional stimulus to the yet fearful, of exalting the

371. Ep. lxx, 12-13.

372. Ibid., lxx, 11.

373. Ep. cxvii, 22.

374. Ep. lxxvii, 10.

Ep. xxvi, 10.

375. De Providentia, vi, 7-8.

De Ira, iii, xv, 4.

Ep. lxx, 21.

courage required to take one's own life.³⁷⁶ We are to understand that nothing but our own will need postpone death: "Scias ad moriendum nihil aliud in mora esse quam velle."³⁷⁷ In this feature of Senecan philosophy perhaps more than in any other instance do we find a radical variance with the standard of his summum bonum. Senecan principle of rectitude and correct living is based on the "rerum natura." "Secundum naturam" is his slogan. But in the matter of suicide, it is a fact born out by experience that this act is in complete rebellion to the propagation and nurturing of life as demanded by nature. Did Seneca not tell us that it is by instinct (instinctu voluntario) that all men tend to preserve their existence? "Sicut feruntur omnes ad conservationem sui."³⁷⁸ But in upholding suicide, Seneca wrote that we must let every season and every place teach us how easy it is to renounce Nature³⁷⁹ and fling her gift back in her face, "omne tempus, omnis vos locus doceat quam facile sit renuntiare naturae et munus illi suum impingere."³⁸⁰ This is Seneca's mortal sin against his own conscience. Cato's suicide is eulogized with superlatives. "Consensus hominum fatebitur," declares Seneca. Cato reached the pinnacle of happiness (summam felicitatem).

376. Ep. lxx, 21.
De Providentia, vi, 7-9.
Ibid., ii, 11-12.

Ep. lxx, 12.

377. Ep. lxx, 21.

378. Ep. xxxvi, 9.

379. Ep. civ, 29.

380. De Providentia, vi, 8.

tem) when he clashed his will with nature's order that he continue living.³⁸¹ The Scipios, the Catos, and other noted suicides of the day were termed the "coetus sacer...contemptores vitae."³⁸²

If there is in Seneca any evidence at all that he had contact with the doctrines of Christianity, it quite possibly could be indicated in the passage quoted hereafter. Similarity of expression on a given topic offers no proof whatever that Senecan teaching drew even in the slightest measure from the newly organized society of Christians. The force of this statement is born out in fact, since the spirit, the intention behind the teaching of each school was radically different. Only in a few material instances is a resemblance noted. But in the case presently referred to, we find distinct resemblance to Christian teaching on the endurance of evil and the unlawfulness of taking one's life merely to escape suffering. Seneca says:

You will find men who have gone so far as to profess wisdom and yet maintain that one should not offer violence to one's own life, and hold it accursed for a man to be the means of his own destruction; we should wait, say they for the end decreed by nature.³⁸³

He advances no proof whatever for the condemning implication that no wise man could reason thus. Seneca merely intimates that in

381. Ibid., iii, 14.

382. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xxv, 1.

383. Ep. lxx, 14.

following this line of conduct, one is taking the more difficult path in life--and incidentally the one more in accord with principle. "Hoc qui dicit, non videt se libertatis viam cludere."³⁸⁴

This phrase gives us a concrete illustration of just what Seneca's "wise man" consisted. It serves as an ideal example of the fact that the "sapiens" first, last and always sought what was most convenient, convictions regardless.

CHAPTER X

SENECA SPEAKS ON LIFE AFTER DEATH

Seneca's belief in the rationality of the soul of man has heretofore been pointed out. The Stoic school whence he drew many of his basic elements of belief, took issue with the Epicureans principally on the subject of virtus. The latter would describe the vir beatus as a man with well satisfied appetites. But the Stoics on the other hand held that the vita beata consisted in a comfortable mind, a mind free from care, indifferent to the physical ills which beset mankind. Implied herein is the fact that in man there is a superior part, a something not material which has it in its power to rise above the physical elements of life. Strangely enough little thought was spent on determining the actual nature of the soul or its faculties. The intense pragmatism of the Roman mind led the Stoic to live for the present only. What might come, what could possibly happen were too indefinite, too subject to the element of fortuna for his practical views. In general, the Stoic doctrine might be summed up in the expression, "live life as though at death you would face annihilation." The matter of existence after death, was entirely up to the conjecture of the individual himself. Belief therein was a matter of choice. The fact itself was indefinite; life here and now was certain, and, hence, was the only sure governing feature of our conduct. It is at this point that Seneca differs widely from the parent school. He does, indeed, voice

the general tenets of Stoicism, and in several instances gives evidence of the influence the Stoics exercised on him. But in Seneca there burned a pride in himself, a longing for the future that belied all his phrases to the contrary. In his words on the subject of life after death and immortality, Seneca reaches the heights of his literary career. These delays of mortal existence, he writes in one place, are a prelude to a longer and better life, "per has mortalis aevi moras illi meliori vitae longiorique proluditur."³⁸⁵ He likewise attains the heights of his religious creed, if we credit him with belief in the matters he states as merely possible. Had Seneca the light of revelation to guide him, and the depth of reason to arrive at the conclusion of the discussion he so correctly begins, his writings might well rank among the most elevated and orthodox of the Christian School. As it is they resemble Christian teaching only in form; the soul is lacking.

Life after death as treated by Seneca may be divided into two main headings: a) the fact and nature of future existence; b) and immortality. We shall study them under these headings in separate chapters.

First is noted the Stoic influence on Seneca, in so much as he states, "mors est non esse."³⁸⁶ But this is the only passage

385. Ep. cii, 23.

386. Ep. liv, 4.

throughout his entire writings in which Seneca indicates that he ever dwelt seriously on annihilation after death. Even here, the exact meaning of the "non esse" is explained in the light of his own theory of what occurs after death. I know already what will happen, he assures us. What I was before I was born, the same will happen after my death. He tells Lucilius that we are mistaken in thinking that death only follows, when in reality it has both preceded us and will in turn follow us, "quicquid ante nos fuit, mors est."³⁸⁷ Since death restores us to that peaceful state in which we lay before our birth, anyone who pities the dead must also pity those who have not yet been born.³⁸⁸ Our life is likened to a lamp, says Seneca, and fools are they who would believe the lamp worse off when it was extinguished than before it was lighted. And he asks, "reverti unde veneris quid grave est?"³⁸⁹

A rare instance of consistency with his own philosophy may be noted in Seneca's remarks about the body of man. The greater part of his moral dissertations pertain to the good of the soul whether here on earth or in the world to come. The soul, we recall, is "ea pars quae melior est."³⁹⁰ As to our body, he assures us that it is but "ossa cineresque."³⁹¹ Our flesh is the

387. Ep. liv, 5.

388. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xix, 5.

389. De Tranquillitate Animi, xi, 4.

390. De Constantia Sapientis, vi, 3.

Cf. ante, p. 41.

391. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xxv, 1.

baser part of our essence, and not at all necessary for our existence. The matter of our bodies is no more a part of our actual self, than are the clothes and other protections we need for comfort.³⁹² Seneca opines that, after death, the soul never again has relationship with the body. This latter was just an instrument in this life, and at death it matters little what becomes of it. "As to burial," he assures us in the words of Theodorus, "you are a fool if you think it makes any difference to me whether I rot above the ground or beneath it."³⁹³ Concern over one's obsequies is a waste of time, "minus molestiarum habet funus tacitum!"³⁹⁴

In an attempt to appeal to unbiased reason, Seneca gives us our choice in the matter of believing in future existence,³⁹⁵ saying that in either case, life or annihilation, he would be prepared. "Mors nos aut consumit aut exuit. Emissis meliora restant onere detracto consumptis nihil restat."³⁹⁶ After death the soul is either sent forth into a "meliores vitam" or is mingled with nature again, and will return to the universe.³⁹⁷ And after a lengthy discussion on the happiness of heaven, he says, "but suppose that I am utterly annihilated, and that after

392. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xxv, 1.

393. De Tranquillitate Animi, xiv, 3.

394. Ibid., i, 13.

395. Ep. cii, 4.

396. Ep. xxiv, 18.

397. Ep. lxxi, 16.

death nothing mortal remains?" His answer is: "aeque magnum animum habeo, etiam si nusquam transiturus excedo."³⁹⁸ But he does confess that the very idea of going nowhere after death is a repulsive thought, an object of fear, "alius metus."³⁹⁹ He tells Polybius that his grief for his brother is uncalled for since one or the other of two views must be in accord with the actual fact: the deceased kinsman if living in spirit is happy, or he is not existing at all. "Quid itaque," says Seneca, "eius desiderio maceror, qui aut beatus aut nullus est? Beatum deflere invidia est, nullum dementia."⁴⁰⁰ But this entire theory of the absolute end of life at death is stated purely and simply as a possibility that he is unable to prove away, while the mass of his writings on the subject give all indication that Seneca entertained more or less definite ideas about existence in the next world.

As though in utter contradiction to all he had told us, Seneca reverses his position, saying, "Sursum illum (animum) vacant initia sua."⁴⁰¹ And, he continues, the soul will reach this goal even before hand by correct living and by the contemplation of its eternal destiny. One of the most beautiful of Senecan phrases in substance as well as in literary expression, is his comment, "that day which you fear as being the end of all

398. Ep. xciii, 10.

399. Ep. lxxxii, 16.

400. Ad Polybium de Consolatione, ix, 3.

401. Ep. lxxix, 12.

things is your birthday in eternity" (dies iste, quem tamquam extremum reformidas, aeterni, natalis est).⁴⁰² And as such it may be taken as the key to the entire discussion of Seneca's belief in the life after death. Seeking to find some relationship between the deeds of our present existence and the life which follows death, Seneca assures us that he has striven to find out,

numquid stultum sit ac supervacuum ultra extremum diem curas transmittere, an cadant bona nostra nobiscum nihilque sit eius, qui nullus est, an ex eo quod, cum erit sensure non sumus, antequam sit, aliquis fructus percipi aut peti possit.⁴⁰³

And his opinion would be that we do receive reward hereafter for virtue practiced: "Nulli non virtus et vivo et mortuo rettulit gratiam, si modo illam bona secutus est fide."⁴⁰⁴ But Seneca gives no indication whatever that this reward of virtue will come in the world of spirit after death, or that the soul after death will actually experience any degree of joy by reason of the deeds it performed when united to the body. The "sapiens" by a life spent in accord with the tenets of philosophy merits "claritatem quae post mortem contingit."⁴⁰⁵ And though he is removed from the actual sight of men, his memory still recurs to their minds, "multa viri virtus animo multusque recursat."⁴⁰⁶ The usual motive in undertaking notable projects, says Seneca is that poster-

402. Ep. cii, 26.

403. Ep. cii, 4.

404. Ep. lxxix, 18.

405. Ep. cii, 3.

406. Aeneid, iv, 3.

ity will long remember our works. We continuously strive "ne (nos) posteri taceant."407 Hence our reward for the practice of virtue in this life and in the life hereafter, is correctly interpreted as meaning the reputation we shall have earned while yet alive, and the renown that will fall to our lot after our death. We conclude by observing that Seneca at no time attempts to show any connection between the deeds of life and an accounting we might have to render for these actions in the life hereafter. He seemed to hold that man's actions are entirely a matter of his individual choice, bearing no relationship with the phases of man's existence. These latter were inevitable regardless of how man acted.

We should expect that Seneca's conception of the future life would be in keeping with his fears and desires of the present life. The strife, the turmoil, the constant peril of life, created in the storm-tossed breast of Seneca a longing for peace. Even when referring to death as being possible annihilation, the promise of escape from the present world of disorder offered its negative but nevertheless somewhat consoling aspect. Death is for all the end, he tells us, but for many it is a relief, "mors est, omnibus finis, multis remedium."408 Telling Polybius that life is but a tempestuous and gale-tossed sea, whose one harbor

407. De Tranquillitate Animi, i, 13.

408. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xx, 1.

is death, he admonishes his friend not to mourn for his brother, for death did but make him free and safe, "ne itaque invideris fratri tuo; quiescit. Tandem liber, tandem tutus."⁴⁰⁹ Death is a release from all suffering, a boundary beyond which our ills cannot pass. A great and everlasting peace awaits the son of Marcia, "excepit illum magna et aeterna pax."⁴¹⁰ The "aeterna requies"⁴¹¹ seems to hold sort of a spell over the turbulent soul of Seneca.

Casting off the old forbidding Stoicism, with its fears and stern aspects of joy, Seneca launches forth in many places throughout his writings in praise of the joy and happiness he hopes will one day be meted out to him. His flights of fancy may in no wise be construed into a Christian significance, though indeed there are elements of the qualities of a glorified soul, the vision of God, the communion of saints, the science infused into the souls of the elect, and so on, to be found in his analysis of heaven. He tells Marcia that there awaits after earth's dull motley the vision of all that is pure and bright, "manet ex confusis crassisque pura et liquida visentem."⁴¹² A person who has died has not lost the light of day. On the contrary, "lucem sinceriorem sortitus est."⁴¹³ Here below, our souls find little reason to rejoice in their lot, that is, the fact of their existence. But after death, freed from this darkness in which they

409. Ad Polybium de Consolatione, ix, 7.

410. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xix, 6.

411. Ibid., xxiv, 5. 412. Ibid., xxiv, 5.

413. Ad Polybium de Consolatione, ix, 8.

grope they shall have absorbed the full light of day and shall be restored to their place in the sky. Released from its prison below, the soul will cast off sin, and in purity and lightness will leap up into the celestial realms of spirit.⁴¹⁴ Once we are set free from this place of shadows, heavenly light will shine down upon us from all sides, "lux undique clara percutiet."⁴¹⁵ And from the "excelsiorum locatorum" it will be a pleasure for the souls to turn their gaze upon the things of earth, and to look back on all they have left behind.⁴¹⁶

Bound, as it were, by the chains of mortal existence, the soul at death admits of no limits of time or space, except such as are binding even the gods. For the native land of the soul of man is the whole space that encircles the height and breadth of the firmament, "hoc omne convexum intra quod iacent maria cum terris, in quo disposita tot lumina in actus suos excubant."⁴¹⁷ Death liberates the soul and admits it into an existence having no boundaries, hence no servitude, "excessit terminos, intra quos servitur."⁴¹⁸ From this sunken region (ex humili atque depresso locum),⁴¹⁹ the emancipated spirit delights in the boundless and open sky, "fruitur nunc aperto et libero caelo."⁴²⁰ It roams

414. Ep. lxxix, 12.

415. Ep. cii, 28.

416. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xxv, 3.
Ad Polybium de Consolatione, ix, 3-4.

417. Ep. cii, 21.

418. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xix, 6.

419. Ad Polybium de Consolatione, ix, 8.

420. Ibid., ix, 8.

throughout the expanses of the universe and "cum summa voluptate" explores all the delights of nature.⁴²¹ Seneca would have us picture to ourselves the brightness of the combined light of all the stars. For us the whole expanse of the heavens will shine evenly. When in our perfect state we shall enjoy the perfect light, (cum totam lucem et totus aspexeris),⁴²² then indeed we shall realize that our earthly life was lived in darkness. Here below, Seneca warns us, we can but hope to enjoy the light which now we see darkly with a vision that is cramped to the last degree, "lucem nunc per angustissimas oculorum vias obscure intueris."⁴²³

Another phase of the happiness of heaven is the associations we shall have in the company of the elect. He assures Marcia that her son and her father rejoice together in heaven, the one just arrived enjoying his new-found light, the other instructing his grandson in the secrets of nature.⁴²⁴ In several places, Seneca makes mention of our communion with the gods, as being one of the joys of heaven. "Patere mihi ad deos meos iter judico. Merui quidem admitti et iam inter illos fui animumque illo meum misi...."⁴²⁵ And he says that our better thoughts order us to

421. Ad Polybium de Consolatione, ix, 8.

422. Ep. cii, 28.

423. Ep. cii, 28.

424. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xxv, 3.

Ibid., xxvi, 6.

425. Ep. xciii, 10.

meet the god's approval, and to prepare ourselves to join them at some future time.⁴²⁶ For the soul says to itself, "When the day comes, I shall leave the body here where I found it, and shall of my own volition betake myself to the gods."⁴²⁷

Seneca promises us that in the life hereafter our knowledge of the secrets of nature will be complete. Some day the hidden laws of the universe will be revealed to us, "aliquando naturae tibi arcana reteguntur, discutiatur ista caligo."⁴²⁸ In the expanses of the universe, the soul explores the blessings of nature, "illic vagatur omniaque rerum naturae bona perspicit."⁴²⁹ Marcia's father initiates her young son in the wonders of the universe and he is qualified to do so having the information not by guess-work but, by experience, having true knowledge of them all, "nec ex coniectura sed omnium ex vero peritus in arcana naturae libens ducit."⁴³⁰

Regarding the negative aspects of the joys of the life hereafter, Seneca enumerates at length the many trials we shall escape when we become partakers of the blissful hereafter. Encompassed, no doubt, with the worries and trials of this life, he often thought of a happiness consisting merely in the absence of each and every troublesome event with which this present life

426. Ep. cii, 29.

427. Ep. cii, 22.

428. Ep. cii, 28.

429. Ad Polybium de Consolatione, ix, 8.

430. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xxv, 2.

is replete. There will be no fear of want, no "divitiarum cura" which became quite a problem to Seneca in his later years. No stings of lust which through the pleasure they give the body destroy the integrity of the soul; no envy of another's prosperity; no disaster to the land or to himself will he meet with in this future life.⁴³¹ Life after death will, therefore, consist in the presence of what we like and the absence not only of suffering, but of the desires of those things which cause us displeasure whether by the gratification of these desires or by their inhibition.

Throughout his discussions on death and the life hereafter, Seneca at best has little of the supernatural element in view. His heaven is joyful only in so far as one could be joyful here below were the difficult things of life removed. There is not one definite place, for example, where he would indicate that his future happiness is awarded as the result of virtuous living. In fact he told us that his "virtus" contained its own reward.⁴³² There was nothing more in store for one who conquered his lower nature in this life, than the resulting convenience he would experience here and now. There was apparently no relationship between the actual deeds of this life and the mode of future existence, and if we examine closely, the reason or explanation there-

431. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xix, 5-6.

432. De Vita Beata, ix, 4.

Cf. ante, p. 52.

fore seems evident. Seneca in life, was true to no moral standard. At death he seems a disillusioned old man; an old man who had sacrificed every ideal he preached, for the comfort of the moment. He had only the fears of life as his real standard. His was more of a goal to be avoided than to be attained. His was an existence, pleasant not so much by the things he enjoyed but rather by the evils he escaped. Now did Seneca associate the hereafter, the one and only hope of true happiness left to him, with any type of pain or punishment, his last real hope would thereby have proved a vain expectation. The unreasonableness of a joyful existence in the life after death for both the good and the wicked never seemed to occur to Seneca. Quite likely he was willing to grant to everyone else, regardless of personal merit, the same felicity he hoped for himself. Such was Seneca, the mild-mannered, affable Seneca as men knew him. Thus it is that in dealing with the question of whether there be life after death or not, he offers us alternatives positive and negative. In the latter event there is no suffering, he says, since it is the same as not being. In the first hypothesis, and this is his personal choice of the two, it must necessarily follow that since man continues to exist he must therefore necessarily be in a happy state. There is no proof given or reason indicated why such should be the case. Seneca merely asserts it as a fact. Epicurus had taught some sort of punishment due those who die after a wicked life. But, says Seneca, "nemo tam puer

est,"⁴³³ as to believe all the stories of the "inferorum metus". He says that he is not so foolish, "non sum tam ineptus"⁴³⁴ as to give credence to the stories of the underworld, of Cerberus, Ixion and the spectral garbs.⁴³⁵ The whole business of fear and punishment makes up the stories of poets:

Cogita nullis defunctum malis adfici, illa,
quae nobis inferos faciunt terribiles, fabulas
esse, nullas immingere mortuis tenebras nec car-
cerem nec flumina igne flagrantia nec oblivionem
amnem nec tribunalia et reos et in illa libertate
tam laxa ullos iterum tyrannos: luserunt ista
poetae et vanis nos agitavere terroribus. Mors
dolorum omnium exsolutio est et finis, ultra quem
mala nostra exeunt.⁴³⁶

But still Seneca speaks of the dying as "timentes ne apud inferos sint"⁴³⁷ and definitely implies that one must needs argue with himself and endeavor to convince oneself that the underworld is actually a compilation of fiction, "persuaseris istas fabulas esse."⁴³⁸ And again he does tell Marcia that following the death of her father, his soul "tarried above us while he was being purified and was ridding himself of all the blemishes and stain that still clung to him from his mortal existence."⁴³⁹

433. Ep. xxiv, 18.

434. Ibid., xxiv, 18.

435. Ep. xxiv, 18.

Ep. lxxxii, 16.

Cf. Juvenal, Sat. ii, 149.

436. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xix, 4.

437. Ep. lxxxii, 16.

438. Ep. lxxxii, 16.

439. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xxv, 1.

But these are the only instances where Seneca would imply any type of unhappiness in the life after death, and he is quick to apply here the "nosmet ipsi fallamus"⁴⁴⁰ cure for all uneasiness and fear.

440. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xix, 2.
Cf. Pp. 67, 80.

CHAPTER XI

SENECAN VIEWS ON IMMORTALITY

With reference to Seneca's views on immortality, it is sufficient to have established his position regarding the life after death. The expression "sufficient" is used purposely because in every passage wherein he speaks of the happiness of the life hereafter, he invariably qualifies it with the note that its felicity is everlasting. In the metaphysical searchings of Seneca, the immortality of the soul is perhaps the one element which is most devoid of argument or question--it is taken for granted. It is the "res gratissima"⁴⁴¹ of his letter to Lucilius. And for the Stoics and Seneca in particular, it was sufficient that a matter be "gratissima" for it to be proved beyond a doubt. At no time does he offer to dispute as to the fact of life after death being eternal in duration. But as evidence that there was a discussion among the ancients regarding the immortality of the soul, Seneca quotes the example of Canus who, as he was being led to execution, remarked, "You are wondering whether our souls are immortal, but I shall soon know."⁴⁴² And Seneca praises him in his search for the truth even when confronted with the fact of his own death, "nec desiit veritatem in ipso fine."⁴⁴³ Seneca himself would begin the discussion on the future life by admit-

441. Ep. cii, 2.

442. De Tranquillitate Animi, xiv, 8.

443. Ibid., xiv, 8.

ting the possibility of its non-existence. But after merely presenting such an alternative to our credence, he proceeds at great length to show his personal belief in continued life of the soul after death. And once this fact is established, the eternal duration of the future life goes along with the life as if a natural element of it. For Seneca, just as the fact of life after death implies that it could be only a happy life, so also by the same token, this life must also be eternal. He tells us that, "I was taking pleasure in investigating the immortality of souls, nay in believing that doctrine...and feeling that I was destined to pass over into that infinity of time and the heritage of eternity" (in immensum illud tempus et in possessionem omnis aevi transiturus).⁴⁴⁴

In the hurry and rush of life, man frequently becomes so much a part of the passing elements among which he lives, that, says Seneca, seldom does he lift his mind to consider things of eternal importance. "Man is too mortal to comprehend things immortal" (tamen homo ad immortalium cogitationem nimis mortalis est).⁴⁴⁵ But he admits the fact that all men are imbued with the innate desire of immortality. He tells us that while we have all the fears of mortals, "omnia tamquam immortales concupisci-

444. Ep. cii, 2.

445. De Otio, v, 7.

tis."⁴⁴⁶ And he says of mankind in general that we plan for the things of eternity."⁴⁴⁷

Quite obviously mortal man cannot attain his immortal status here below in this life. It is, therefore, but taken for granted that all immortality spoken of by Seneca refers to existence after death. He assures Marcia that not her son, but only his very imperfect likeness has perished. For the boy himself is eternal and in death has reached a far better state, stripped of all outward encumbrances and left simply to himself, "ipse quidem aeternus meliorisque nunc status est, despoliatus oneribus alienis et sibi relictus."⁴⁴⁸

A person in life, considered in his soul, is actually immortal, but he does not take on the evidence of immortality until his death. After death "aeternus est."⁴⁴⁹ One of the joys of a soul reaching its destiny after its separation from the body, is the knowledge that its felicity will endure forever. In the light of this knowledge, it proceeds to the enjoyment of all that has been or will be throughout the ages of all time, "aeternitatis suae memor in omne quod fuit futurumque est vadit omnibus saeculis."⁴⁵⁰

The fact of immortality is but an attribute of the main

446. De Brevitate Vitae, iii, 4.

447. Ep. ci, 1.

448. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xxiv, 5.

449. Ad Polybium de Consolatione, ix, 7.

450. Ad Helviam de Consolatione, xx, 2.

feature, the existence of life after death. As such, it is independent of its subject, regardless of the nature of this life. But we have seen, that in Seneca's order of things, there is but the one mode of existence after death. Happiness is the lot of man in the next world, and eternal is his joy: "Felices animae animae et aeterna sortitae."⁴⁵¹

451. Ad Marciam de Consolatione, xxvi, 6.

CHAPTER XII

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

It has been our endeavor in this thesis to collect from the many writings of Seneca, those expressions of moral and philosophic thought, the summation of which might be termed "Senecan Philosophy." For several reasons this was not an easy task. First, throughout the course of Seneca's works many contradictions occur, a fact that often prohibits the drawing of definite conclusions as to which of several opposing courses Seneca adheres. Secondly, and somewhat following from the above-mentioned point, the statements of Seneca almost invariably need analysis and interpretation. The contradictory elements and ambiguous terminology on occasion give rise to a number of possible meanings, and it is our conclusion that Seneca himself was often at a loss as to just what he intended to say. In looking into the man's life for confirmation of some principle or another, we were further confused, in that the philosopher Seneca was a much different man than Seneca the statesman. With regard to this latter point, his inconsistency led Fabius to remark that had his judgment and action been answerable to his wit, it had been much more for Seneca's reputation.

Quintilian describes Seneca as a shallow thinker, "in philosophia parum diligens."⁴⁵² This expression adequately

452. Institutiones Oratoriae, x, i, 125.

states the depth or lack of depth of Senecan thought. His weakness was his love for compromise, in action and in teaching. Personally, he seemed convinced of nothing. His was a type of negative existence, the living of life to avoid pain. In some few instances, he attempts to justify by his writings this servility to changing circumstances; in most cases, however, he states what he thinks should be done, with a bland disregard of his own condemning actions.

He prided himself on being a pupil of the Stoic school, which taught a system of rigorous self-discipline that trained its adherents to cope with any of the vicissitudes of life. Stoicism was afraid of life and of emotions because they hurt, and it was to this school that Seneca allied himself. But the strict following of these precepts was too much for his vacillating and negative will. He was a bold, inconsistent moralist preaching rather than exemplifying Stoic virtue. Thus it is, that Seneca's life, his writings, and often his thoughts formed three divergent streams in all of which Seneca found himself to his own consternation.

The writings of Seneca at their best, show no evidence of having been inspired by the teachings of Christianity. He, like other Romans of the day, could not help having learned about the new Religion, but he made no distinction between the Christians and the Jews, whom he termed "gens sceleratissima."⁴⁵³ Seneca's

453. Quoted by St. Augustine, De Civitate Dei, Lib.vi, Cap.ii.

brother, Gallio, refused to hear St. Paul speak in his own behalf, and with this refusal there passed forever the opportunity for influence of the great Apostle on this gifted but haughty Roman family. Seneca's conceptions of rectitude, death and the future life must be viewed as literary speculations, rather than as his religious beliefs. And any resemblance which Senecan morality holds to Christian Doctrine is purely material in substance. Moreover, we hasten to add that, contrary to the practice observed in a number of commentaries on Senecan morality, one cannot isolate phrases of Senecan teaching and correctly understand them. His philosophical opinions offer of accurate interpretation only when associated with their respective contexts. In the course of this paper, all citations from the works of Seneca have been interpreted in this light.

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The thesis, "Analysis of the Philosophy of Lucius Annaeus Seneca", written by Brother Gabriel Connery, F.S.C., has been accepted by the Graduate School with reference to form, and by the readers whose names appear below, with reference to content. It is, therefore, accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Father Mertz

July 14, 1940

Father Millor

July 18, 1940